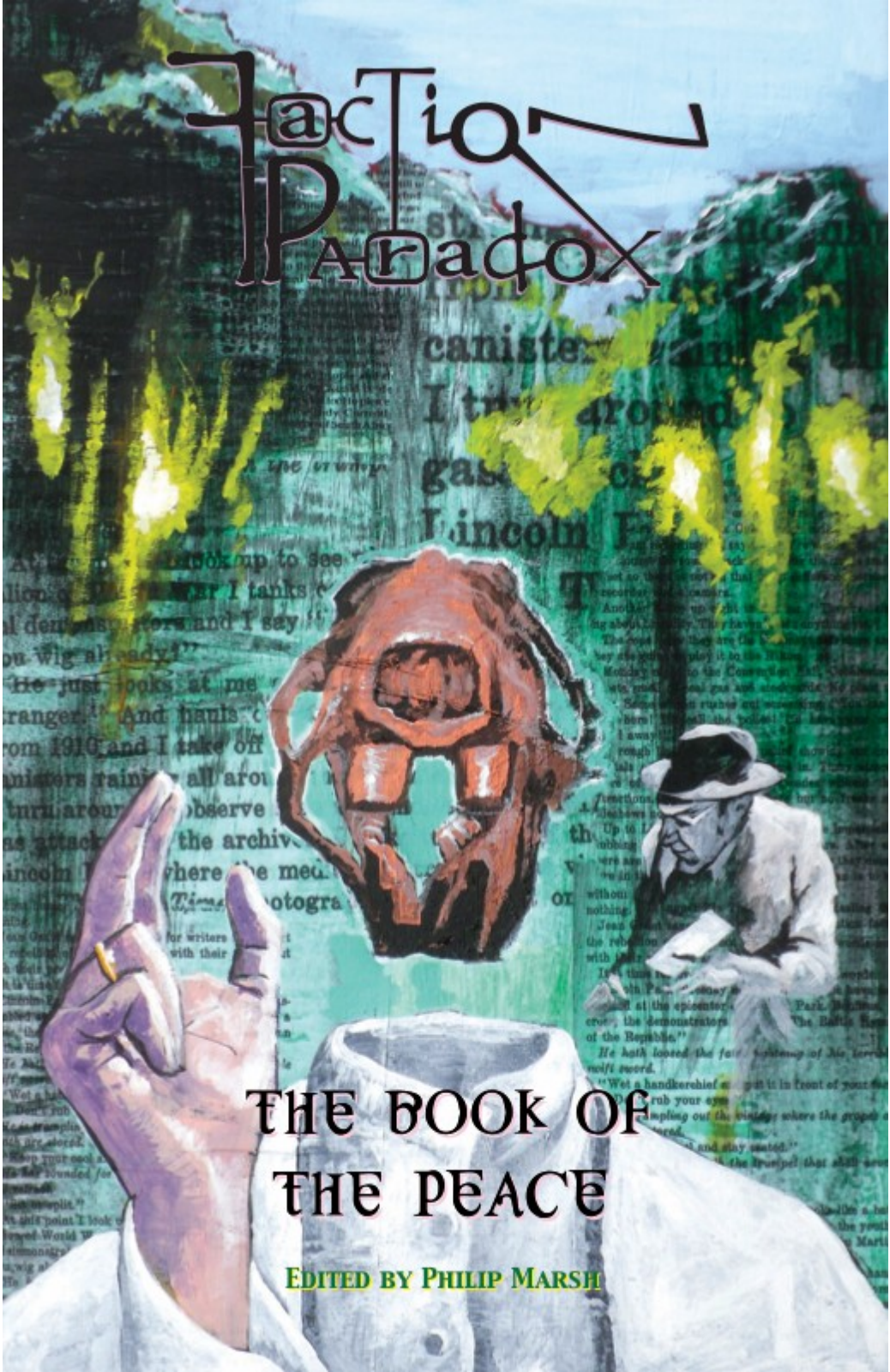
Factio Paradox
THE BOOK OF THE PEACE
EDITED BY PHILIP MARSH

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The Book of the Peace

Edited by Philip Marsh

Obverse Books
info@obversebooks.co.uk
www.obversebooks.co.uk
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The Ugly Spirit

Philip Marsh

"There is a problem, *Señor*."
The Governor looked up at the thin, pale man in front of him. His neatly side-partinged hair was clumpy due to the humidity, and his eyes expressed surprise through his thin-rimmed glasses.
"A problem sir?' the man replied with the drawl of an educated member of the southern United States. 'What kind of problem?"
"Here, *Señor*. Your documents are incorrect." The Governor pointed to a date written on the tourist card that the man had presented to him. "This date here. It says this card is for 1952."
"What?" The American looked at the card and saw the offending date. "Well…that's just a mistake. The consul in Panama must have made an error. Look – all my other documents have the right date on them. My passport, my plane tickets…every other document I have on me says 1953. It's a simple mistake, that's all."
"I am sorry *Señor*," replied the Governor, "but we must inspect your luggage." He nodded to a policeman who was standing by. "Open it up please."
The American looked on as the officer opened his luggage and went through his clothing and personal items, including his medicine gun. At this point the Governor picked up his telephone and called for the Sanitary Inspector to join them. The Sanitary Inspector was clearly of the same suspicious mind as his colleagues, and suggested that the various medicines within the luggage also be inspected. The Governor nodded slowly, as though weighing up a great burden of evidence.
"I am going to have to refer your case to the authorities in Mocoa. I am afraid," he said, "that I must place you under Town Arrest while we wait for their decision, as well as impounding your medicines and the medicine gun."
"This is ridiculous," said the American. "How do I benefit from being a year out on my tourist card? I didn't even write that date, it was the consul – what benefit would he gain from writing a false date?"
"That is not for me to say *Señor*. But I am afraid we must insist that you remain. We really should place you in a cell to ensure that you do not run away…"
"Excuse me," came an unexpected voice. The American turned around and found that one of the Capuchin friars from the local mission was in the doorway. "I'm sorry but I was passing and I could not help but hear. It seems harsh to send this man to prison for such a small offence. Would you instead allow him to be a guest of the mission? You would be free to check on him at any time."
The Governor considered this with deep thought so obvious that the American knew that it was a put-on.
"Thank-you Father," he said. "If you are prepared to accept responsibility for him I am prepared to discharge him into your care."
"Of course, of course," replied the Friar. "Do you agree Mr…?"
"Burroughs," said the American. "William Burroughs, although you can call me Bill. And that would suit me fine."

When they reached the mission, Bill was shown to his room. As soon as the door was closed behind him and he was alone he unpacked his clothing, going a layer further down

than the policeman had. He knew that the policeman hadn't seen it or else he would not have been allowed to go free, but it was so unbelievable to him that it had not been discovered that he had to see it still there for himself.
But there, underneath a pair of khaki shorts, the pistol remained undisturbed.

He waited for eight days. Eight days with nothing to do but drink and feel rough and sorry for himself – although to be fair he had to admit to enjoying the standard of life in the mission which was much grander than he could have afforded himself. As in America, it seemed there was always money in religion, and plenty of people prepared to serve a Holy man (and his guest) at the click of a finger. Still, if he ate like a King he was none the less a prisoner. Eight days of contradictory messages from the authorities, some saying that his journey was over, and others that he was free to continue. He had a permanent headache which got worse with each day that passed. Trying to capitalise on one of the positive messages, he returned to the Governor's office and managed to persuade them to allow him to continue his journey, and even managed to find a guide who was prepared to escort him to his next destination. The positive action distracted him from drinking (at least during the day) and helped him ignore the pain in his head. And then, just as the preparations were being completed, there was a knock on his hotel room door. He knew the knock of an officer of the law from experience, and when he opened up he was greeted by the sight of a local cop with a piece of paper in his hand, which he then passed to him.
"You need to come with me,' he said. 'You're being sent to Mocoa to be investigated further. I am to escort you."
The police officer took him back to Mocoa via the river, Bill scarcely attempting to hide his impatience at being forced to retrace his steps. At Puerto Umbria he began to feel unwell, shivering and feverish. By the time they reached Mocoa, he knew he needed medical attention. He asked his escort how long it would be before he saw anyone official. "Is there a hospital nearby?"
The officer smiled. "You won't be going to no hospital," he said.

The metal door slammed shut behind him. Bill sat on the bed and looked at the bare walls of the prison cell.
'Not quite what I had in mind,' he muttered to himself. He swallowed some Aralen and tried to sleep through the shakes. As the hours passed his already impeded attempts to sleep were disturbed further by the wanderings of the police marching band as it made its regular way through the town. 'Oh well,' he thought to himself, 'at least they aren't playing The Star Spangled Banner.'
Even when it was late enough for the brass band to have been relieved of their patriotic duty, he found himself enjoying only brief snatches of sleep. Seen through his fever the darkness of the prison cell took on an infinite depth, while his sweat-soaked clothes clung heavily to his weakened limbs. For one delirious moment he mistook this clothing for a straight-jacket, so confined did he feel in them. Lack of sleep plus his fever left him hanging in the space between waking and dreaming, that uncomfortable state in which the mind recognises that it is awake but still believes the phantasms that the sleepy mind conjures up, and in which an hour of experience can take place in a matter of seconds.
With no light and no window, he had no way of telling what time it was or how long he had actually managed to sleep. He looked in vain for any change in the level of the light to indicate the hour of the morning, but saw nothing. No…not nothing. He looked again, peering into the darkness that contained, somewhere within it, the far wall of the small cell. Somehow he felt that the wall had disappeared, and that if he were to reach out his

fingers would fail to find the rough brickwork, and would instead slip into the same dark something that had taken the wall. Or maybe it was a nothing rather than a something. He tried to see the outline of the bricks in the gloom and after a moment he did see something, just below the surface of the darkness. And then the something moved. Bill pushed himself back against the wall in shock. His rational mind tried to regain control. It's just your imagination, he thought. Get a grip, Bill.

And then the thing in the darkness moved again. Again, he only caught a glimpse of the thing itself, but he noticed its movement. It swam. More than that, it swam upwards, darting through the air as though the darkness were a liquid. It reminded him of childhood trips to aquariums, where he stood in front of the glass tanks and marvelled at the strange creatures that existed within. The momentary fearful thrill when one would swim right up to the glass, allowing him to see their strangeness up close and the inevitable imagining that the creature might press against the glass panel that separated their two worlds, and that the panel would be loose or the glass would be flawed and suddenly crack under the slight extra pressure….

He looked into the darkness, glancing around it quickly, trying to detect any sense of movement. He almost gave up but then there was another movement faster than his tired eyes could follow, from the top left of the wall to the bottom right. Before he could follow its full path it crossed his eye-line again, back up towards the room, then diagonally back down again, its movements becoming faster and more frantic.

Dear God, he thought with feverish clarity, *it's trying to get out*.

And then it stopped its frenetic motion, and hovered still in the middle of the air in front of Bill, and he felt it observe him, and he felt what it was like to be the strange creature being peered at by an unknowable and alien presence. Even though it was right in front of him, he could still only make out the roughest shape of the thing, the details were lost in the darkness like a squid hiding behind its ink. But he knew it saw him, alone, weak and utterly helpless, and he suddenly realised what it was that he was looking at.

'The Ugly Spirit,' he whispered, as though worried that uttering its name would make it more real.

-the glass rolled across the floor-

He screwed his eyes up tightly and shook his head to clear it, but was rewarded simply by the feeling of a bell tolling inside his skull. The spirit remained, looking into him, and Bill knew that the spirit already knew him and knew him well, and that this was just the confirmation of everything he had suspected since Joan...since he…

-the glass rolled across the floor-

And then, it backed away, fading completely into the wall. Bill relaxed, allowing himself to believe for a moment that the spirit had gone, that maybe this whole sickness had come from his body's efforts to force the intruder out. He let his head drop with exhaustion.

An impact shook the small cell. He looked up, terrified but the creature was not there. And then suddenly it was, racing straight forwards towards him until it hit the edge of the darkness. There vibrations from the impact echoed through the walls and the creature disappeared again, clearly intending another attempt. And then Bill saw it. Hovering in the air, directly in front of him, was a vertical crack. And he could do nothing but sit in terror as the creature came back a third time, and this time the crack became a hole as the thing exploded out into Bill's world like a bullet through glass and swallowed him whole.

Burroughs woke the next morning with hardly the strength to reach for his Aralen, but the medication worked well enough for him to get to the Police Chief's office when he was called. Much to his relief the Chief understood the situation immediately and told him he was free to go. He made it to the hotel and called for a doctor who came and gave him the appropriate shots. He rested for three days, taking Aralen the whole time and never experiencing anything like the confusion of his night in the cell, the details of which were

now somewhat murky. He remembered fragments of dreams and illusions, something about a horrific deep-water creature, and the cell feeling more like a diving bell at the bottom of the sea where no sun could reach. Still, given the fact that his skin and clothing had been constantly wet with sweat and the lack of any kind of light in the cell, that was hardly a difficult dream to interpret. He could vaguely remember feeling as though he recognised the creature, although he dismissed this as the kind of dream logic that makes you accept that your mother is being played by a famous movie actress, or that your long-dead cat could suddenly walk into your living room and ask for food in English.

His enforced confinement left him with little to do but reflect on how he had ended up in his current situation – something he was particularly loath to do but with no distractions it was impossible to stop his mind roaming, like a tongue drawn to a sensitive tooth. Getting out of Mexico City had been essential after (-*the glass rolled across the floor*-) with the trial proceedings dragging on, even if it meant going to stay with his scandalised parents and having to put up with the stares from the neighbours every time he went out of the house. St Louis had become no more his kind of town than it had been when he'd left it, and he was certainly become no more of the kind of person who could be accepted into the community. The looks he received were all the same, a mixture of pity (for his parents, not for him) and puzzlement – how could such decent folks as the Burroughs' have produced such a good-for-nothing delinquent son who brought nothing but shame on such a good family? His previous escapades (they would be thinking) were bad enough, but now to have dragged the Burroughs name across the front pages of every sleazy, low-class tabloid...why, it must break his parents' hearts.

Bill's attitude to these neighbours was that if their houses burned down he would hope they were in them at the time. But if he cared nothing for their opinions he still found the constant attention a drag, and he longed for the distance from home he had established in his travels and years in Mexico City. On top of that, scoring any drug worth taking was a lot harder than in New York or Mexico. He longed to get away from it all, both geographically and mentally. He found the answer. In South America there was said to be a drug called *yagé*. Few Westerners had ever tried it and its effects were said to include telepathy, the presence of a blue spirit, and visions of a city. It was, perhaps, the ultimate hit. And, to make it even more irresistible, it was about as far from Palm Beach (in terms of climate, culture and communication routes) as it was possible to get. Bill had no desire to attend his trial and instead put all his (meagre) resources into preparing for an expedition – to travel into South America on his own and find *yagé*. After as much of Palm Beach as he could stand, Bill set off for Bogotá, 8,600 feet up in the Andes.

"So, you're the American who's interested in *Baniateriopsis caapi* then? Pleased to meet you!"

The man who greeted Bill was over six feet tall, with a dark beard and a receding hairline which, along with the deep timbre of his voice, did nothing to alter the impression of him as being full of youth as he bounded down the dusty corridor towards him, hand extended.

Bill took the offered hand but rather than being shaken, the man carefully manoeuvred Bill out of the way of a crate that was being wheeled across the floor with all the care shown by a runaway dog. The narrow corridor was full of constant motion – specimens of various animals and plants being pushed to and forth, and anyone who wanted to traverse the corridor was expected to take their chances and dodge around the traffic. Bill made a point of taking the chaos of the Botanical Institute in his stride.

"If you mean *yagé*, then yes, I am. Bill Burroughs."

"Sorry, I was showing off. Dr Schindler – Richard. I'm an ethnobiologist, if you know what that is."

"I have some background in anthropology. I am also aware of your work with hallucinogenic drugs in the South American region. I am something of a student of the

effects of drugs on human consciousness."
"Good man! I firmly believe that the second half of the twentieth century will be as dominated by the exploration of the changes made to human consciousness by the careful and scientific use of drugs as the first half can be characterised by the attempt to repress them."
"I certainly hope so," Bill concurred.
"Please, follow me to my office where were can speak in more comfortable circumstances without risking being run down."
Schindler led Bill through corridors equally busy and into a modest office – a desk with two chairs, a filing cabinet and a shelf containing various reference works of ethnobotany (Bill noticed a book by Heinrich Klüver on peyote that he had read) were the only furniture. However, littered around the room were numerous botanical samples – plants and vines of kinds Bill had never seen.
"I'd apologise for the mess," said Schindler, "but I suspect that the sight of these specimens interests rather than repels you."
"It does indeed. I take it these are all examples of local flora?"
"They are. I've been working in the field with the local tribes for some time now, collecting samples. You can have no idea how many different species of plant there are in this part of the world, with effects known only to those who live here. We're talking thousands, not hundreds. And many of them have medicinal uses to cure diseases that we in the smugly civilised world have no effective treatment for. And that's without considering the massive potential in the area of the expansion of consciousness, which I believe is more your area of interest, right?"
"That is correct. I understand that you have had personal experience of the use of *yagé*?"
"I have indeed. In fact – I have a vine of it right here." He picked up the vine from his desk. "I knew you'd want to see it when I received your request for an appointment so I had one dug out for you. I figured that any American who even knew what *yagé* was must be pretty serious."
"Most considerate. And most interesting. You know how it should be prepared?"
"It's the inner bark you need, but every tribe has a different way of cooking it up – it's usually mixed with other vines or made up as an infusion. The local *brujo* is the person you'd need to speak to about it."
"But you have tried it? What did you see?"
"Precious little, I'm afraid. Colours but no visions. But I'm convinced that I've just not found the best method of preparing it that works for me. Perhaps you will have better luck?"

Schindler had been only too eager to help someone so obviously interested in his line of research, advising Bill on the kind of equipment he would need for a successful expedition and giving him a letter of introduction to contacts of his in the areas Bill would be passing through. Bill travelled to Cali and Pasto, enduring frequent body searches by the Policía Nacional whenever the bus stopped, before arriving in Mocoa. He finally managed to try *yagé* – prepared by a drunken *brujo* who took half Bill's vine before preparing the infusion meaning he felt little effect. That night when he went to bed he found himself dreaming a city, both strange and familiar with elements of New York, Mexico City and somewhere he did not recognise but which had the look of South America. It was so real that he felt as though he could step into it and live another life in its streets, a stranger with no past to haunt him and no need to ever return to his own world, with its rules and prescriptions on everything even remotely fun. He had continued his explorations until he reached Puerto Asís, where he found himself confronted by the intractable governor who discovered the error on his tourist card and brought his travels to a halt. Thankfully, Schindler came to his rescue by helping smooth the process and offering him the chance to accompany his own expedition. Burroughs went to meet him back at the Institute.

“Hello there Bill! I see that neither the malaria nor the ridiculous bureaucracy that passes for government around here managed to finish you off.”
“Indeed not, although both tried. Good to see you Richard, and thank-you for all you did in getting my papers sorted out.”
“Not a problem. I take it you’re eager to get back on the trail?”
“I am. And I am extremely grateful for your kind offer of a place on your own expedition. It will make getting back on schedule a lot easier, as well as providing me with stimulating company.”
“You’re going to find it a rather different experience than you’ve had up to now Bill. No more bus, no more bouncing around in the back of a truck. We’ve got everything we’ll need – decent food most importantly. You’ll do well for yourself especially.”
“What do you mean?”
“Well, I hinted to people in the right places that you’re here as a representative of the Texas Oil Company, travelling hush-hush to scope the country out. There was a survey done a little while back but the company pulled out when they didn’t find any oil. But the locals have developed a myth that there’s a huge oil lake like no-one’s ever seen before under the ground and that the oil company are going to come back to drill it all up and make everybody rich. Not a word of truth in it of course but since when did that ever stop anyone believing something they desperately want to be true?”

Schindler was as good as his word – the expedition made Burroughs’ life a lot easier. He proved to be the exact opposite of the cliché of the stuffy academic, chewing cocaine with the indigenous tribes and enjoying the company of some of their female members. Everywhere they went they were offered free transport and access to the officers’ mess – and in an irony that pleased Burroughs enormously they were given digs in the governor’s house wherever they went. But he wasn’t just there to enjoy himself – he still had work to do. At every stop of the convoy he carried out his investigations seeking out the local *brujo* to get them to prepare *yagé* for him. He also found himself increasingly interested in the beliefs of the tribes he met – perhaps because of the spiritual nature of the preparation of *yagé*, and he made an effort to understand how each tribe saw the world. He was less interested in their creation myths and histories than in how their world-view dealt with the previously unknown factors that came into their lives when they encountered the likes of Schindler for the first time. He felt as though he was trying to discover something, but he couldn’t quite work out what it was.
Back in Mocoa he made a connection for *yagé* who led him into the jungle. After about ten minutes’ walk they arrived at a thatched hut with a dirt floor where the *brujo* lived.
The *brujo* prepared the *yagé* for him (after the obligatory gift of alcohol), which involved not just preparing the infusion but also preparing it spiritually – chanting and gesturing to prevent evil spirits from entering the liquid. When ready, it was black and oily, and Burroughs swallowed the bitter mixture down. Initially he felt as though he hadn’t been given enough, as nothing seemed to happen. But then, after a couple of minutes he was filled with a nauseating dizziness, and a paranoia of impending danger, of being murdered there and then by the *brujo*’s assistant. The whole of reality seemed to blend and change in blue flashes.
He vomited repeatedly and was quite certain that he was going to die. He somehow managed to stagger out of the hut, despite feeling as though he had lost all co-ordination in his legs. He collapsed to the floor and continued to vomit until he was left retching up nothing at all. When it was finally over, he flopped onto his stomach, unable to move. The jungle was suddenly crawling with life – huge, monstrous centipedes shuffled through the undergrowth, snakes hung from trees like liquid branches, and insects coated every tree-trunk, every leaf and twitched between every blade of grass. He could almost feel them crawling between the lips he was too exhausted even to close, swarming down his throat

and choking him, while his ears filled with the all-encompassing ticking of the insect army that had occupied the forest and everything within it.
He was sure that there could be nothing left in his stomach, yet his dry-retching was so violent that it felt as though he would bring his stomach up after its contents. Every heave tugged at his insides, and in a moment of utter panic he felt something inside himself come loose. Worse, as he retched, the thing – his stomach lining? A vital organ? – was being forced up his throat. Burroughs tried desperately to force it back down but the retching continued, and the thing continued to clog up his wind-pipe as more and more of it was squeezed into the narrow canal. His rational mind tried to reassure him that this was just a drug-induced hallucination but was drowned out by the frantic, almost inhuman sounds that were all Burroughs could make as he fought desperately for breath. His mouth was forced open and something came out of it. He tasted it before he saw it, as whatever it was slid across his taste buds, leaving a rank taste that would have made him vomit on its own. Its slime dripped down his chin, mixing with the spittle and vomit he had produced on his own already, but as disgusting as it was, without it his throat might have been too dry to expel it. With one final heave, the blockage was gone. Bill gasped desperately for breath, head down, partly because lifting it was an almighty effort and partly because he knew what he would see and he wanted to delay the moment of confirmation. But he knew he had to look, and with an effort that pulled what felt like the last remaining fluid in his body out as sweat, he raised his head from the floor.
In front of him, hanging in the night air, was the creature that he had dreamed about during his malaria hallucination in the prison cell. He remembered it now, amazed he could have ever forgotten such an apparition, not just because of its terrible appearance, but because of his instant identification of the spirit and its association with...(-*the glass rolled across the floor*-). Unable to move, he could do nothing but study it closely, his mind feeling clearer now that the Ugly Spirit had been expelled. As in the cell, it was mostly visible through movement, and in a moment of strange clarity Bill wondered if it possessed some form of camouflage, a way of preventing the eyes of predators from being able to see them when they stayed still – did spirits have predators? Like him, it appeared weakened by the trauma of its expulsion, floating a few inches off the ground before sinking back down to the jungle floor.
Bill realised that his life might depend on being the one to recover first. Screwing his eyes closed in concentration, he pushed with all of his strength against the ground to hold himself up into at least a crawling position. He managed to raise himself just inches from the ground before collapsing back down again. He looked back at the Ugly Spirit. It seemed to be recovering – slowly, but with every effort it managed to rise a little further from the floor before sinking back down. There was no way he was going to be able to lift himself before it managed to recover enough to attack, so he focused on dragging himself across the floor. He wouldn't be able to make his way back into town but he might just be able to hide in the jungle foliage until it lost sight of him and went on its way. Bill was fully aware of the dangers of the undergrowth in the jungle, and the creatures he could disturb by his presence, but he would gladly risk waking a possible snake to escape this nightmare made...well, of whatever it was made of.
He had covered at most a couple of feet when the last of his strength deserted him, and with his muscles burning he found he could not so much as reach out a hand in front of him. Slowly, panting, he twisted his neck to look back the way he had come. There, hovering much more certainly than before, was the Ugly Spirit, looking at him. Bill knew it was over. He felt a sudden breeze as it swept through the air, and then the world went out.

Burroughs woke up the next morning under a blanket on the hard floor of the *brujo*'s hut. His packet of Nembutal lay opened beside him – he must have managed to somehow force

some down his dry throat to bring him back down to reality. In all his years of drug-induced states, had scarcely experienced anything as unpleasant and he was thankful that he could remember so little of it.
He pulled himself together and made his way back into town. Schindler saw him coming and ran out to meet him.
“Bill? What the hell happened to you? You look so rough that if Death came for you right now it would improve your day. *Yagé*?”
Burroughs nodded. Actually he felt fine, and full of purpose, but his clothes were filthy, and he must have looked an absolute sight. “A little warning to you,” he replied. “Don’t go toe-to-toe drinking *yagé* with someone who’s been downing it for seventy years. But I’m fine.”
Schindler nodded, but was obviously unconvinced.

After his near-death experience, things rapidly improved for Burroughs. Schindler’s story that had everyone believing him to be a representative of the Texas Oil Company held good, leading to him being offered passage for five days on a Columbian gunship. Although he had separated from Schindler’s party in order to follow his own individual mission, Schindler had continued to be a lucky presence in his life – appearing miraculously just as Burroughs’ bag (including pistol) was about to be searched by the Colombian officials and using his official status (and impressive chauffeured car) to get his bags passed unopened.
“Must be fate making sure you experience that consciousness-expanding hit you’ve been after, Bill,” Schindler had said with a wide smile when Burroughs had asked him how he’d managed to arrive at such a fortuitous moment.
On the downside he was suffering badly from the shakes, which he put down to the herculean amount of alcohol he was drinking, what with having nothing else to do in the evenings. He could feel the alcohol inside him, his body struggling to cope with the toxic substance he was flooding it with. He was sweating a lot, which was natural in the heat, but it felt more like his body was trying to purify itself, to sweat the poison out. His stomach was unsettled, and whenever he ate it felt like the food that was being dissolved by his stomach acid was alive and fighting against its fate.
On top of this were the blackouts – most of which he was able to put down to being drunk but which, more worryingly, had started to occur in the day before he had drunk enough for it to be an excuse. At first they had felt like nothing more than moments of distraction – he would be conversing with a member of Schindler’s team or with a stranger in a bar, and suddenly he’d find that the conversation had jumped forwards and he had no memory of what he or the other person had said. On top of that he started experiencing the strangest feeling of being trapped – for all his travelling from town to town he felt stuck in a place he could not escape from. He knew he could just quit his search for *yagé*, but something wouldn’t let him, for all the frustrations of dealing with a bureaucracy so incapable of minding its own damn business that it would have driven Kafka to distraction.
He kept moving. Esmeraldas, Las Playas, Guayaquil and Peru, where vultures circled and roosted on the roofs of buildings, and hovered frustrated over dreary bullfights waiting for the carrion to be left unattended. In fact at times it felt as though the vultures were following him – he frequently had to kick them out of his way when he left the little shop he was renting, as they ate up the garbage that had been left in the street by the inhabitants. They sat on statues and looked down from the roofs of buildings. Wherever he turned, they always seemed to be there.
He continued to experiment with *yagé* whenever he found a supply and a willing *brujo*, each experience more potent than the last. Blue flashes, a sexual energy that produced his first heterosexual urges since his marriage to Joan (*-the glass rolled across the floor-*), and a

sense of occupation by a blue spirit which, far from frightening him, left him feeling calmer than he had in weeks. His dreams became particularly vivid. Trips to the Composite City were frequent, but his astral travels took him to other places too. A dust-bowl town in the American West where time stood still, or a kingdom of strange, malevolent monsters. A court in ancient Egypt, torn apart by the conflict between Horus and Sutekh. After his previous near-deadly experience he took this as reassurance that he was on the right track, and that the track was worth following to the end.

Travelling between towns is a lot easier when you have your own personal chauffeur, Burroughs reflected as he pressed himself back into the seat and glanced again at the driver who, even if Burroughs hadn't been without eligible male company for so long, he would probably have had his eye on. The car was owned by the U.S. Point Four scheme, which had been designed to give under-developed countries a hand along the way. Like his employers, the driver was of the opinion that Burroughs was a representative of an oil company and if it meant free rides he was not going to rob them of that misapprehension. And while he was normally a strict adherent to the principle of everybody minding their own damn business, the comfort of the trip to Bogotá made him warm to the entire concept of U.S. involvement in other countries.

The only downside to the situation was the strain on his nerves caused from having to restrain himself from explaining to everyone he spoke to that their belief (which they had elevated until it became a religion) that they were sitting above a huge lake of untapped oil was less realistic than a rich, corrupt politician's belief that he would be getting an easy ride into Heaven. In fact he had lost his head a couple of times (usually thanks to the alcohol) and told slightly startled members of the populations of the various towns he crossed exactly that – thankfully so far no-one had believed him. But then, that's religion for you. He'd seen the same level of delusion in Texas.

Burroughs had spent most of the journey so far trying to work out whether there was any chance of eliciting anything more from the driver than just a free ride, but was having difficulty reading the signs. Of course, eye contact and general body language is harder to read in someone who is having to keep their eyes on the road. Still, he seemed happy enough to converse while driving and had offered no objection when Burroughs had hopped into the front passenger seat rather than making use of the greater space in the back.

"So, how'd you like it here? Fancy settling down, buying some property?" Burroughs asked affably. "Wife? Kids? Pet alligator?"

"I can't see it," the driver replied. Burroughs wanted him to explain which part of it he couldn't see, but to his frustration he turned the question back on him. "How about you? When the oil company comes back, you gonna be in charge of operations round here?"

"Not if I can help it. I'm just here on a fact-finding mission."

"What kind of facts you trying to find?"

"Oh, you know. The stability of the area. Potential problems if we set up operations here, that kind of thing."

"Found any?"

"Plenty, and I'm not finished yet. Say, you might be able to help me. You've been around the area, driving big-wigs all over the place. You must have built up some impressive local knowledge"

"I'm only paid to drive, and I keep my eyes on the road."

"Oh, come on. You must hear and see things as you go around. Just between us."

"I'm not sure what I can tell you. The only thing I know about oil is how much to put in the tank to make this thing move."

"Don't worry – we have experts for that. I want to know what's happening on the ground rather than under it."

"Hmm." He paused. "Ok, just keep my name out of it. If I say anything that could be seen

as off-putting to your company there are a few powerful people who'll want me to drive straight into the nearest river – there's a lotta people expecting to make a lotta money when the deals get signed."
"You have my word as a representative of the company that anything you tell me will be in the strictest confidence."
"Ok. So, what'cha wanna know?"
"Well, for example, how would the locals view my company's arrival?"
"Speaking as an outsider? I think people have this idea that it's a get rich quick situation – the oil company will move in and suddenly there'll be money for everyone. I'm not sure if they've realised exactly what would happen to the land itself, and where the money would go." He dared a glance at Burroughs. "I mean, I'm sure your company would want to do things properly but let's be honest here, you'll be dealing with politicians and I don't care which country you're in, politicians soak up money like sponges soak up water. How people will feel once they realise that, I wouldn't care to speculate. But I doubt it'll be pretty."
"My company is also interested in more...esoteric issues that might impact on the success of our operations here."
"Esoteric? You sure got a fancy turn of phrase for an oil man. What kind of thing are you talking about?"
"Well, if we're going to be dealing with the local population then we need to be mindful of what they think and believe. Not just about the company as a whole but about the timing. You know – that we don't turn up on some day of great local ceremony, or accidentally upset the local spirits by disturbing some feast in their honour – you know how touchy spiritual beings and their followers can be. Why, one time in a location I am not at liberty to reveal, we arrived and started putting the machinery together, only to find the local villagers totally hostile to us. We tried to bargain with them, but they just kept resisting. Random acts of sabotage would take place, vandalism. Turned out we'd arrived the day after a shooting star and they'd taken that as a sign that we were devils come to destroy their land."
The driver raised an eyebrow. "Were they wrong?"
Burroughs laughed. "That's a matter of opinion. But random things like that can have a massive impact on the reception to our company, and it pays to keep such factors in mind. Have you heard about anything like that recently that I should know about?"
"Well...it's funny that you should mention a shooting star..."

The problem with cursed places is that while everyone knows where they are, no-one wants to talk about them, let alone actually go there – especially if the purpose of the trip is to guide a white man to it. Luckily, if there is an area that no-one will visit, it is possible to establish where it is by a process of elimination. Watch people's movements for a few days and see where they don't go. Soon enough he noticed an area in the jungle which everybody seemed to give a wide berth, and Burroughs knew that the driver's information (picked up in a bar) had been good. Once he had identified it, he noticed...something. He couldn't see it clearly, it was like a faint rainbow that you don't notice until you do. It was pointing down to a specific point in the jungle. Burroughs set off for it immediately.

Even though at times the canopy of trees blocked the sight of the marker in the sky, Burroughs never doubted that he was on the right track. In the distance there was a funnel of colour that glowed, a colour he had never seen before and had no words to describe. As he got closer to it, the jungle itself took on its glow. He saw an anaconda slide on its way, its markings each taking on a different impossible colour, but it was also sliding through time as hatchling, neolate, snakelet, adult, to rotting corpse, each overlaid

over the others. The trees around him were saplings, ancient and in their prime, all at once. The jungle itself he saw as bare rock, as a home to dinosaurs, as grazing land for cattle, devoid of trees.
Finally he reached the source. The strange effects he had been experiencing were so concentrated here that he could hardly make sense of the information coming through his eyes. But on the ground where the effect was most concentrated was, of all things, a book. He should have been surprised, but somehow felt as though he had been expecting to find it. Excitement swept through him like a first hit. He reached out and picked it up, holding it to his chest. He was possessed by the idea that this book was the most important object he had ever touched and he must read it as soon as possible. The impossible colours were giving him a headache. He would have to take it back to his hotel and read it there. He put the book into his bag and made his way hastily back to town.

Back in his hotel, Burroughs sat on the edge of the small, uncomfortable bed and took the book out of his bag. It was bound in some kind of leather, but of a texture that Burroughs had never come across before, as though from the skin of an animal unknown on Earth. On the cover in gold lettering was the title; *The Book Of The Peace*. There was no author's name on the cover or spine, and the back was blank. Opening the book, he found that the title page was more forthcoming;

> *The Book Of The Peace*
> *- being the only accurate record of the end of the War between the Great Houses and their Enemy, and the effects thereof on the denizens of the Spiral Politic and wider universe in the period in which the armistice was negotiated and signed.*
> *- presenting the accounts of a small number of subjects from a range of time periods and places, using their individual perspectives to provide an experience-base from which broader generalisations may be made.*
> *- including several carefully selected case studies, forming a history of the Peace 'from below' as researched and retold by the eminent scholars in their fields.*

None of this made any sense to Burroughs, despite which he found himself growing increasingly excited. He reached to turn the page…when there was a knock at the door.
"Excuse me, Bill?"
Schindler? What was he doing here?
"I hate to turn up unannounced old fella, but I've just made a great connection for *yagé*. Totally reliable, and from the way he describes the effects of it it's exactly what you're looking for."
Burroughs felt confused. What he was looking for? Didn't he have what he had been looking for?
"I've got him waiting, ready to take you to the *brujo*. I really think it will be that ultimate *yagé* hit that you've been trying to find. But you've got to come now."
Of course, thought Burroughs, *yagé*. The thing he had come to find. He put the book back into his bag. "Just coming," he called.

As Burroughs sat in the *brujo*'s hut, Schindler having left as soon as he had introduced Burroughs to the guide, he felt a strange anxiety about taking the *yagé* that was being prepared. Not fear of overdose – he had been building up his resistance since his near-fatal experience and he had the appropriate downers with him to stabilise if he did O.D. No, it was more like a voice at the back of his mind, telling him not to go ahead. At the same time he was very aware of the book in his bag – maybe he should just go back to the

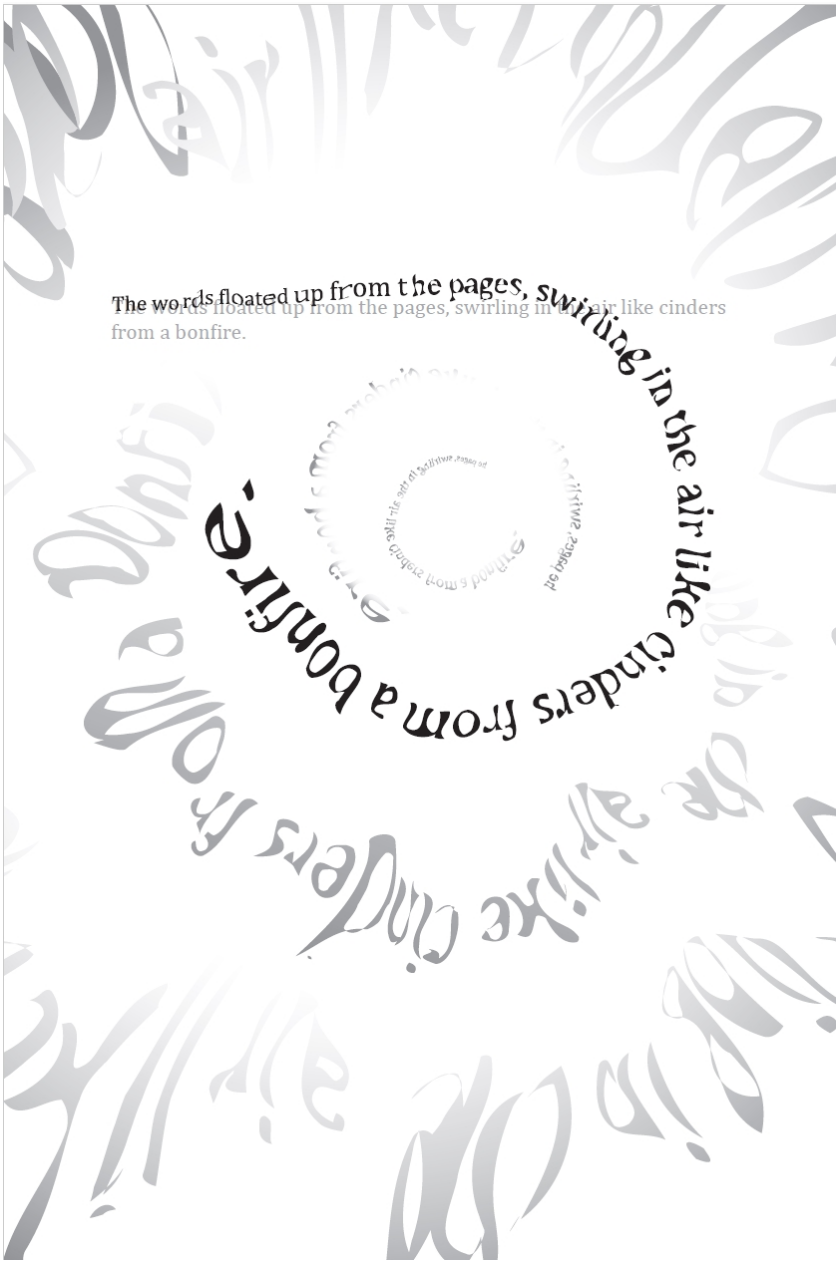
hotel and read it?
The *brujo* handed him the infusion and Burroughs quickly drank the bitter liquid. This time it had been mixed to perfection. The hut began to shake as though tearing itself free from the ground – coming unmoored in both time and space. More – there was something coming unmoored inside him. He felt his identity becoming fluid – gender, ethnicity, sexuality all in flux. He stopped being Bill or Burroughs and found himself in a blue space. The walls of the space were translucent and through them he could see the Composite City that he had observed on previous *yagé* trips. And across from him was the creature, the spirit that had been haunting him for the last few weeks. He felt no fear of it in this moment.
"What are you?" he asked it.
Don't you know? The answer appeared inside his head, although the creature did not seem to have spoken.
"I thought I did. I thought you were the Ugly Spirit, but now I'm not so sure."
The Ugly Spirit? The entity you blame for the death of your wife? The woman you killed?
"That was an accident. If you've been inside my mind, you know that."
I know it's what you tell yourself.
"You've been guiding me. Moving me towards finding this book. What's so special about it? Reads like H.G. Wells."
The book is so much more. It is an artefact from the future, fallen out of time. It tells of the future after the War has ended.
"War? What war? With the Russians?"
Not a war as you would understand it, but a war between two civilisations so powerful that they can alter time itself. No-one can say how long it has been waging or whether that concept has any meaning in a conflict in which history can be changed in an instant. Whole planets have dedicated their existence to surviving the War, even though the combatants don't even know they are there. That book tells how the War ends. I must have it to take back to my planet so we can see what happens and plan accordingly.
"You seem pretty powerful – why not just take it? Why use me at all?"
The book created a fissure in time. Any time-sensitive creature who tried to touch it would be instantly destroyed. But humans are not time-sensitive, and can touch the fissure briefly with no harm.
"When did all this start? How long have you been manipulating me? Is that why I...killed Joan? Did you make me do it so I'd end up here?"
You already know when I first possessed you. You just do not want to recognise the fact.
Bill quickly changed the subject.
"So what now? You read the book through me, and then leave with the knowledge of its contents?"
Of course.
"You will pardon me if I doubt the word of a malignant alien creature that took possession of my mind without permission and manipulated me for several weeks. Especially as during that time, I experienced thoughts and dreams I took to be side-effects of taking *yagé*, but now seem more like stray thoughts that bled from your consciousness into mine. Mass extermination on a cosmic scale and this book is somehow part of it. So...no. I refuse."
To get to that book I endured timeless captivity and an almost impossibly long journey, even for my species. If you don't allow me to leave with it I will take it from your corpse.
"But you can't do that either, can you? Because if you could, you'd have done it already. I think the book's still too hot for you to handle directly which is why you still need me until it cools down. And I'm nobody's patsy."
With the creature separated from his consciousness by the effects of the drug, Bill's mind felt clearer than it had for a long time. Before the creature could react, he jumped sideways, through the blue translucent wall which bent around him like a viscous jelly.

He was possessed with the certainty that he was travelling through space and time, that this was the real power of *yagé*. He found himself in the Composite City, as he had in his dreams. What's more, he hadn't arrived as himself. Like someone who suddenly finds themselves in the middle of a riot, being pushed and shoved this way and that, Bill was bouncing around between the bodies of the population of the city, entering each one for a moment before being repelled. But for the moment he was a part of the citizen he experienced their consciousness – their ideas, their sexuality, their gender – and for that fleeting moment he felt and understood them no matter how different from himself.
He fought to gain control of himself but the constant shifting of consciousness was too much for him to adjust to, and he quickly blacked out.

The kitchen was Bill's favourite room in the house. The room itself – the fixtures and fittings – bore a striking similarity to the one in the house she had grown up in, where she had spent many hours watching her mother cooking. She had caught the cooking bug from her and there was little she enjoyed as much as the putting together of a meal, not just preparing the meat itself but seasoning it just right, or baking a loaf of bread until the smell filled the room. These scents took her back to that childhood kitchen more than the physical resemblance, as she watched her mother glide around the room, in total control of her surroundings. Never were these remembrances stronger than when she made chilli, using her mother's special recipe, as she was now.
Bill had lost track of how long he had been inhabiting the body of this woman – Margo – but then he wasn't really sure how time worked in this world. He seemed to have been here for weeks since he had blacked out in the crowd on his arrival in the Composite City, but as he had not come down from the trip yet, then in the real world much less time must have passed. To find himself lodged in the consciousness of a black woman, married to a man she not only loved but experienced passionate yearnings for was something that took some getting used to (well...perhaps not the bit involving yearning for a man). It wasn't that Bill was completely unused to heterosexuality – he had fathered a son after all – but it had never been the same as with a member of his own sex. But through Margo he experienced the firing of the synapses that happened when she saw her husband, and when they were in bed together – although the things Margo did to David were not unfamiliar to him...
Such excitement spiked at the sound of the front door opening, and then moments later the door of the kitchen. David was home. Margo automatically took a step towards the door as he came through, but she stopped short. There was something different about him, something threatening. Bill could see what it was, and he took advantage of Margo's confusion to set forward in her consciousness.
"Hello Bill," said the creature inside David. "I'm pleased to have found you again."
"I'm afraid I can't share your pleasure."
"Oh Bill, I'm hurt. After we spent such an...intimate time together. You must be getting a feeling for that yourself, hiding inside Margo like an unwanted thought."
"I'd say I have a better idea how possession works as a result, yes. You see, I've been thinking. You entered my mind while I was in a weakened state, ill or in the middle of an over-dose, when I couldn't be sure of what I was seeing. But now I'm fully conscious of you, you can't slip into my mind like a bad dream because my defences are up. And that means we're a lot more even than we were before."
Bill reached down and picked up a kitchen knife. A very sharp kitchen knife.
"Oh Bill," said the creature, taking a slow step forward, "put that down. You're just embarrassing yourself. And besides, who needs two murders on their conscience?"
"I don't think the killing of a monster in a drug-induced hallucination would class as murder in many courts of law. Not even in South America."
"But what about David? How does Margo feel about you murdering her husband in cold

blood? I can't believe she's very happy about the idea."
"You aren't her husband."
"But I'm in his body, and you'll have to go through him to get to me."
"Through a person that doesn't even exist? I'll take my chances."
"Oh, they exist Bill. This isn't an hallucination, at least not the kind you mean. It exists after a fashion, and is known by many different names by numerous species. The city is made up of the consciousnesses of the inhabitants who all see it differently based on their own experiences. David and Margot are real, Bill, and if you cut them, they bleed."
"It's prick, not cut," said Bill. "If you're going to misuse the immortal Bard, at least get it right."
"Pedantry and distraction. Can you kill someone else, Bill? While the person who loves them watches helpless inside her own body? And speaking of being helpless..."
Scene change – Dingy sitting room – Bill sat in a chair facing the door – A stranger makes tedious small talk on another chair – Familiar décor, familiar stranger – How could she forget? But that means…
Tries to stand – Can't – Sluggish – Alcohol and drugs – She can't think clearly or move – The door opens – Tall, thin man with sandy hair and glasses enters.
"Hello Bill," said Burroughs. "Or should I call you Joan? It would in some ways be more accurate, especially for the next few minutes."
Bill tried to reply but her mouth wouldn't open.
"Let me explain how this is going to work," said Burroughs. "In this world, I am more powerful than you. And I have seen into your very soul – if you can be said to possess one. And so I know how to break you Bill, and have the power to create the situations in which to do it. And I'll go through each one of them until you agree to let me take possession of you again in your world so I can finish reading the book and get the information that I need. So, what's it to be, Bill? No...don't answer. I need to prove that I mean what I say to you first. Now, where were you? Oh yes, sat here." Burroughs sat in a chair facing Bill. He reached into his pocket and produced a pistol. "Shall we begin?"
Suddenly the room becomes sharper, more vivid, like an eternal present moment and Bill finds himself utterly helpless to change what is about to happen.
"I think it's time for our William Tell routine," says Burroughs.
Bill does everything she can not to move, not to reach for the glass. But Burroughs stares at her and her hand moves without her permission. She picks up the empty tumbler from the table in front of her and places it on her head. Burroughs aims the pistol. Bill remembers seeing this from behind the gun, remembers looking at Joan with the glass on her head, remembers aiming, remembers pulling the trigger. Remembers the glass flying across the room, undamaged. Remembers Joan falling.
Burroughs cocks the pistol.
Joan can feel the dull weight of the glass on her head. She sees the man she has lived with, married, had a child with, even loved for a while before the drink and drugs poisoned everything, standing before her, pointing a gun – at her? Over her? It's so hard to tell, and she struggles to care enough to try to work it out for sure.
Bill can feel the dull weight of the glass on his head. He sees the man he once was, but even he cannot read his own expression as he looks at the woman he lived with, married, had a child with and even...but the drink and drugs poisoned everything, standing before her, pointing a gun – at the glass? At her? He's not even sure anymore. He looks for the information in his memory, searching for the certainty that should be there but there is just a fog of substances and justifications. He needs to know if he meant to kill his wife...and he doesn't.
The gun goes off with an explosion that shakes the heavens, but the dead have already woken.
The glass rolls across the floor.

“How was it for you Bill? Feel like taking another spin?”
Bill looked up at himself from the floor. The glass tumbler lays on the carpet.
“I thank you for your kind offer,” Bill replied, hiding behind his southern good manners, “but I am afraid I have a prior engagement.”
Burroughs laughed. “Bill, the only thing you have to do is allow me back into your mind so I can get that book. Otherwise I just keep running you through the most traumatic events of your life until you crack up and agree. You’re no hero, Bill, and I’ve plenty of material to work with – the maid and her boyfriend on that day you can’t quite remember, for example. If the people of your time knew you the way I do, they would be utterly disgusted. I’m not judging. But your life and sanity is far less important to me than the future of my species. And I need that book to guarantee our survival. So, why not just agree now rather than go through all that?”
“I’m sorry, but as I said, I have a prior engagement.” And with a quick movement Bill picked up the glass tumbler and threw it at Burroughs. It went wide, but the creature flinched instinctively and Bill charged across the room, narrowly dodging past the creature as it reached for him and making it through the doorway of the room...and back into his own body in the *brujo*’s hut. Luckily the creature hadn’t noticed that the real world was starting to encroach on the Composite City, evidence of a come-down that Bill had felt as well as seen. Knowing he had seconds, if that, he reached into his satchel and pulled out the Book. He threw open the hard-cover and exposed the paper pages within, before taking his cigarette lighter from his pocket. The *brujo* had gone but the fire still smouldered, and there looked to be enough unburned wood to sustain another flame. Then he looked around, and sure enough found himself facing the creature that had possessed him throughout his expedition. There was no doubt in Bill’s mind that it could, and would, kill him if he ceased to be useful. He flicked the lighter, and dropped it onto the fire at his feet. The creature hissed in fury, and looked ready to charge but Bill held the book over the fire and the creature hesitated, presumably trying to work out if Bill was bluffing.
He wasn’t.
The book fell from his hands into the flames. It burned, releasing a cloud of blackness but the pages did not blacken, rather the flames broke the bonds between the content and the pages it was trapped on.



The creature watched as the information it needed was blown away by the breeze, heading back towards the fissure. Hatred burned in its face, and something Bill recognised even in an alien species – need. Sickness. Letting out a terrible hiss of fury, the creature

flew through the air at Bill, who pulled out his gun and got a shot off at it. The bullet tore through the slimy membrane of the creature's body but the creature was on him before he could tell if he had actually pained it. He found himself sinking inside the creature's gelatinous body. He tried to pull himself out but there was nothing to get a grip on, and he rapidly felt the strength in his body dissipate, his life-force absorbed by the creature…

The creature expelled Bills' body, leaving the husk on the ground. It had not been the kind of energy that the creature had been craving but it would have to do for now.
With the book destroyed, the creature would be able to provide less information to its fellows than it wanted, but it could at least report that the Peace was real. That in itself would enable them to make plans and prepare. The creature prepared itself for the effort of travel and began its long swim home between the stars.

What Keeps Their Lines Alive

Niki Haringsma

One spotlight glides across a bone-faced man pacing the stage. He swishes his red cloak about, thick cloth draped in scrimshaw teeth and matted tufts of hair. The man's left hand, adorned with beaded strings drawn from his red wrist to his fingers, carries a leather-bound book. Not many in the audience notice that the same hand's shadow holds a staff.
He stops pacing when a second figure joins him, a woman, covered neck to toe by a plain mantle. She looks over her shoulder at the crowd.

Even next to the man's garish necro-fetishist display, the woman's appearance is striking. Her wildly curling hair, a lush mass of aged white, sprouts from bare bone peeking out behind her mask. Two layers of smooth skull make up her grinning half-turned head, one yellowed and inhuman, the other visible only through the slits and tunnels of the first, wetly shining straight through glasslike skin and meat.

Turning toward the stalls, she flings away her mantle to reveal her body in full length. What stands proudly before her human audience is a naked aberration, the shock of which ripples through the crowd as each spectator tries, and fails, to process what they see.

Behind the two figures downstage flaunting death, three other players make up the tableau. The first, now posing near the left wing, is a tall man in a three-piece suit and classic derby hat. He has a book clutched in both hands and looks for all the world like he never wants to leave the spotlight again. A young woman in loose fabrics mirrors his position to the right, although unsteadily so in a coltish way, giving off the impression she's been shoved onto the stage straight out of bed. Her right hand holds a black book of her own. Further upstage, the place between both humans is taken by a hulking mass of clay and metal limbs.

The naked woman standing front and centre poses confidently. While her ritual mask hides most of the translucent shimmer aimed inward at her fats and tissue, her body from the neck down lets the stage lights pass almost clean through, stopped only by the rigid double mass of bone inside her and around her. Her exoskeletal armour allows the visual effect of one living corpse trapped within another, both of her glazed hearts beating underneath two nested sets of ribs.

Her inner chest expands and twitches when she clears her throat. "Good evening, gathered tribes," she calls out, "and a warm welcome from us all! Tonight, Faction Paradox is proud to present to all you War-scorched souls: our grand celebration of the Peace!" Her speech seems less enthusiastic than her posing, but she makes up for it by projecting each word as loudly as she can across the seats.

"My name is Mullion, Cousin of our House! And the gentleman beside me is Cousin Axastyakis, here to grace us with his passionate performance." The red man's large fang necklace rattles lightly as he bows.

"Please also extend a warm welcome to Cousin Cá Bảy Màu," Mullion continues, "come all the way from Earth to share with you his questionable millinery tastes. No doubt towering above me as I speak is our majestic Cousin Hole. And lastly, a big round of applause for Little Sister Amara, a true selfless heroine of our age!"

An awed silence fills the hall. Scattered claps start up and just as quickly dim again. A child breaks through its dumb fear and starts to scream.

In low gutturals, Axastyakis grunts at Mullion to stop hamming it up already.

“So where have the Elders gone off to, then?”

“Left us to rot, it seems.”
“I thought I caught a skull mask in the audience at one point, but it may just have been a really pasty bald guy.” Cá Bảy Màu sighs and prods the fire with his poker. “I guess it went okay, all things considered.”

“Hmpfhhhg,” Axastyakis agrees, his teeth clamped around a chunk of roasted meat.
“I mean, we’ll do better once we’ve had time to actually rehearse. This was basically just a dry reading. Though I’m sure the crowd was utterly convinced by our confusion.” Cá Bảy Màu takes off his hat and waves it at the smoke. “I know I was.”

The cabal of five sits gathered on one side of a small fire pit, Hole’s long limbs forming a shifting frame around the four bipedal bodies. The sky is thick with unfamiliar stars.
Three books lie piled up on a reed mat by Amara’s legs. She grabs the top one from the stack and turns it over in her hands, the cover’s gold leaf capital A made richer by the flickering flames. “So as far as I understand it,” she says, “these three… figures, let’s call them, their lives were all taken? And now the Elders want us to play them, spouting bits of text at the universe until we get it right. Right?”

“Seems these lines are all that’s left of them too,” Cá Bảy Màu says, picking up the second book. “Although with this B character here, it’s hard to tell what’s scattered and what’s not.” He shuffles his legs closer to Amara’s and opens to a page at random. “Slip packed caught run break free get get no no no no lapse pent! Look at this, it’s complete fragmented nonsense. An entire book of utter Dada.” He flashes her a grin, his tawny nose crinkled with joy. “I love it.”
Mullion snatches the book out of his hands, ignoring his affronted noises. “I suppose we’d better make it good,” she sighs. “Against all odds. You take this one, Little Sister,” she adds, holding the book out to Amara. “The lines remind me so much of your charm.”

“Sure, very funny,” Amara says, her hands still firmly on the book of A. She avoids Mullion’s glare as the offer is pointedly withdrawn.
Above them, Hole’s mouth-gaps rattle into motion. Only Cá Bảy Màu briefly looks up, mid-bite, toward the bulk core blocking out the sky. “It was difficult,” a voice box on the nearest limb states after long seconds. “The lines are too demanding.” Its words are slow and joined by little flecks of clay. “My form will crumble at the task. There is much conflict inside of.” With a shudder, its metal croaks back into silence.

“Better make it good,” Mullion mutters drily. She reaches over to the fire for a skewer rod. “Brimming with confidence.”
“You bib founb goob, fough,” Cá Bảy Màu says, gesturing at Amara with an empty fork. He swallows a big mouthful of greens. “Did sound good. As C, I mean, earlier. The part kind of suits you.”

“Right. Thanks.” Amara throws him a half-smile before grabbing a skewer of her own and sniffing at the blackish meat. “Not too sure about that, but thanks.”
“Could be us, could be anyone else,” Axastyakis says quietly. He leans across to grab the

book of C. Mullion's clear eyeballs stare at him from dual sockets. "This could be you," he muses, weighing the book in his hand. "Could be me. Scraps of mangled lives, to serve up to the crowds day after day."

Cá Bảy Màu settles himself more comfortably on the mat, tucking his long legs under him. "Ax, you're not scared, are you?"
"A little." Axastyakis smiles. "But mostly curious. As to what the Elders have got planned, too. What *reconstitution* is supposed to mean."

"Not for us to ask," Cá Bảy Màu says. "Maybe we'll truly be rebuilding them. Us." He purses his lips. "Them. Whichever. Or maybe we're unravelling them further. Anyway. We hold the books, we face the crowds and try to sell the lines…" He turns his head to throw a wink at Amara. "Now there's a challenge."
With lazy grace, their lush rehearsal microworld snakes further through the void. The fire crackles softly. "Inside of me," Hole's voice box bellows out.

"—proud to present to all you War-scorched souls: our grand celebration of the Peace!"

This morning's planet brings a more receptive audience. The crowd's bright, shaggy faces grin at them in rapt attention.

Cá Bảy Màu holds out the book of C. "This was my last chance," he says, affecting a slow and solemn tone. "The threads are breaking. Soon, they'll snap."
Beside him, Mullion stands facing the audience, her doubled chest puffed out. "When I was young," she proclaims, "I looked through eternity's eye, and eternity created me!" The lines of A sound clear and artless on her tongue.

Cá Bảy Màu flips to a random page for his response. Before he can open his mouth, Amara cuts in, showing the book of B. "Up up up find path find pass shove tear through throat out out tight burst gone!" she quotes, waving her free arm wildly at the stage lights.
Teasingly, Cá Bảy Màu steps in front of her, blocking her from view. "Well, I thought wrong!" he yells. "But we all did, right?" His fingers turn the page for his next words.

Mullion moves to interrupt, but Axastyakis deftly lifts the book out of her hands. "Paradox anxiety!" he booms, choosing the first line his eyes fall on. "Cries spouting from her throat! The dirty mess of bones!"
Behind him, Hole moves closer and extends its eye-holes arced over his head. "A—" it starts, "Aggg." Its voice coil chokes around the words.

Adjusting his straw boater, Cá Bảy Màu eyes the left balcony and reads with slightly wobbling scansion. "All I've got left is the things I can touch, and smell, and see." He touches his stock tie. "My clothes." He draws a finger over the book's thick leather binding. "My skin."
"Stiff clasped skin," Amara concurs.

The crowd chuckles sort of politely.

In the ebb of a rubbery coral field, Amara sits beside a stream to soak her tired feet. Its water babbles with a friendly shade of green.

“I’ve been enjoying these past nights, actually,” Axastyakis tells her. He doesn’t risk dipping his legs into the liquid, but he’s taken off his cloak and splayed it out beneath him. “It’s a good old-fashioned fight for dominance.”

Amara raises an eyebrow at him. “You think so?”

“Don’t you? I think the part of C is fascinating. It seems a little disconnected from the others, even compared to the raw chaos of B.” He puts his fingers to his chin in contemplation. “I think I could take to it, if I could just have a moment alone with the book to practise.”

“I couldn’t get a book at all just now,” Amara says wistfully. “Cá Bảy Màu had her nose stuck in C when I got there, and grande dame Mullion was hogging A for herself as usual. I’m sure Hole was hiding the book of B under its big old butt.”

Axastyakis guffaws. “I’m not sure if our Cousin even has a butt,” he says. “It was created to serve tea, not to recline on cushy sofas.”

“Was it really?” She scratches at her cheek. “Kinda hard to picture it steadying a tray. Or, you know,

lasting two seconds in polite company.”

“Hrm. I was its friend, once. Long before you joined.” His voice carries genuine affection. “Hard to even look at it now. The years have ground its programs down, and the strain of the plays seems to be crushing what’s left.” He prods softly at the coral ground, watching small tendrils pull back at his touch. “I know I’d be terrified, stuck inside that wreckage, no other casing suited for a transfer. Wouldn’t you?”

“Sure,” Amara says by way of reply, absently playing with a coiled strand of her hair. “Anyway, thing is, I wish we could just make up our own characters instead of being stuck reading from these books. Cá Bảy Màu’s tried copying over a bunch of lines for herself, but the words just slip away.” She sighs. “It’s a little morbid, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“How any of us could be the figures in the books?” She stares up at the scudded clouds. “I guess I trust the Elders that it’s true, you know, but it seems horrible. Just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. One unguarded moment. Can you imagine?”

“Now there’s an idea,” Axastyakis says, ignoring her question. “Make up our own characters... defy the ritual.” His grooved fingers grasp the air. “Take it into our own hands!”

Amara smiles up at him. “Or stick with what we’ve been given, but do a bit of… improv. What if, Cousin, we would make up our very own C?” She waggles her toes in the water. Ripples rush out from her pale skin to overtake the surface. “I mean, if it’s belief we’re meant to be cultivating, wouldn’t it turn the whole thing more convincing if we’d *really* make the character our own?”

In response, Axastyakis plucks a white bone needle from the webbing draped across his cloak. He sticks it deep in his right wrist, steadying the shaft through a small eye-ring on his bracelet. Drops of sweetly fragrant blood well up around the puncture.

“Make the character our own…” He grins, his mouth opening into furrowed teeth. “I like that idea, Little Sister.” He withdraws the needle from his vein and holds it to the sunlight. The pale bone pulses steadily with its wine-red wash. “I like it a lot.”

This egg-shaped stage is lined on every side with swaying life forms, marking the craggy

edges of its antigrav terrain. Its flabby, pulsing audience, their tendrils linked together to enclose the ellipsoid, look inward at the players in calm approval.

Cá Bảy Màu floats gently toward one side of the space. Her hair today is covered by a charming white affair, tied under her chin with a lush, soft scarf. She barely has to touch the drifting book of C before her. “There’s a mote in our eye that’s rammed itself into the core!” she quotes, her words projected clearly through the oval. “Pull it forth, tear it off, wash it out!”

Mullion swims across and flips the book up to her angle. “We make the ripples that make us,” she says. “Oh, I love cats so much.”

Bobbing beside them, his cloak billowed in the air, Axastyakis holds the book of A with just two fingers. “I can’t see you, I can’t move and the body’s stuck, it’s stuck, why is it stuck?” he reads, dodging Amara as she veers toward him playfully.

Cá Bảy Màu nudges the book of C away from Mullion and flips the pages to a random line. “Holding my book,” she quotes, her face and poise echoing perfect interbellum kitsch.

In the dead centre of the egg, Hole shivers fitfully in place.

Long limbs crush down rehearsal space and grass.

Deep inside the caverns of its used-up body, one of Hole’s three system programs puffs up its gaseous cloud-cast self. It travels lightways across rusted bands and loops. The clay slits making up Hole’s topmost eyes send downward transient signals beaming one.

It holds the C book under frontpiece eye-holes and parses content fixed. “Why don’t you end it already?” it projects, before its two other programs suck it dry and shove it down. The new main scans the lines for meaning with speech continuate. “I’d be safe, no matter what,” its mouth-slots tone.

Its vestigial servant roots tell it urgently to either help something or go low-slow, so it shuts off the insistent parts and zeroes in on sensory. Two humans air-gapped pace the outward plane.

It tastes words, drifting in through fissures from the reachless light and sky. “I like you, Cousin,” the sounds code. It preens itself.

“You what?” a second outside voice carries, and it reads conversation, words not aimed at it but at its flesh fine friend instead.

“Look,” the first words-source again speaks trailing, “this is pretty awkward, but I was wondering if maybe…” the information stales in clay dust foul. “If maybe you’d fancy going out with me sometime?”

Its other programs overtake it and subdue it, stuff it back into the clay depths screeching, and the new fronting presence glitches into place. It stretches itself up to catch the bright world input. “Yeah,” it hears. “Wow. I’d like that. Just, wow. I had no idea you felt that way, Amara.”

It sinks down to the mute.

Tonight, Cá Bảy Màu comes dressed in the seductive drama of gold-embellished floor-length silks and swathes of carmine velvet. Her half-mask sticks to her smooth hair, its

lower jaw lifted off and stashed away, the furrowed sockets repurposed as a playful fascinator. No doubt the word she's going for is "jaunty."

Amara sits waiting by a rocky spring tree coppice, cultivated under nests of smidgen stars. A fist-sized flame tethered beside her bobs unsteadily in the air.

Cá Bảy Màu steps toward the dancing light, jacquard heels tapping on the bare patches of slate. "How's it going, little siren?" she asks cheerfully.

With a badly suppressed twitch, Amara turns to her and smiles. "Better now that you're here, Cousin," she replies, reaching out her hand.

Gently, Cá Bảy Màu grabs her fingers to help her stand up. "Typical of you," she says as Amara dusts herself off, "to invite me way beyond the black stump. What secrets are you hiding here?"

Amara's giggle mingles with the warm trill of the night's insects. "C'mere, you fool," she answers softly.

Cá Bảy Màu leans forward to cup her Little Sister's face. She looks hungrily into Amara's eyes, a deep brown gleam framed by the girl's elfish little ears under her fingertips. Amara blinks up at her a long moment, then leans in and touches their lips together, sticky puce paint flecks clinging to her dry mouth when she pulls back again.

"The rules of dramatic parsimony," Amara says in a stage whisper, "state our lines would mesh together like those of lovers."

A grin tugs at the corners of Cá Bảy Màu's puffed lips, equal parts coquetry and joy. She lets go of Amara's cheeks and grabs a book out of her snag-skin shoulder purse. With an elaborate flourish, she opens to a random passage.

"Away away get rip away out from the welded fold away!" she reads emphatically from the page. The lines are smeared across with clay and red and spittle. "See the sky away through tight gut clamped down drifting laden limpid cage!" She raws her voice on purpose, savouring the way her Melbourne vowel-*twoinnng* augments the throaty bursts of Weimar stage tradition.

Amara laughs at her wild gesturing. "Gorgeously put," she says. "The B-form character as translated through a beautiful nerd."

"Stole you one as well," Cá Bảy Màu replies with a smug wink. She draws the book of A from her bag and tosses it at Amara, chuckling as she fumbles to catch it.

Over the fire-lit enamel binding, Cá Bảy Màu sees a shudder starting in Amara's hands, a shock that runs along her arms and forces its way out her throat when she speaks again. "Thank you, my life's thief, for this delicious sudden gift," her Little Sister recites softly. She opens the book to show Cá Bảy Màu the line, inked halfway down the first page that she turns to. "Do you know," she quotes from the next sentence in that same unsteady voice, "do you know… that's the part I never got before."

This audience at least knows what bipeds are. Back when the War was drifting past their planet, soft soldiers would crash down from the sky and occupy the hospice beds. The skeletons of those dying friends would poke out from their limbs at times, thin white things crumbling in dried-out parody of the hydrostatic standard. To their eyes, the bone-faced actors seem like playful throwbacks to those days.

"Not big not hollow full of full of bile and wet and scrape," Mullion reads in a brisk monotone. The crowd makes cooing noises. She leafs to a new page, then sighs and waits

for someone else to speak instead.

Amara holds the book of C out to Cá Bảy Màu. He takes it from her with a gentle bow and reads the first line his eyes fall on. “Why am I here?” he shouts with joyous intonation. “What is this place? I’m not dead!” He laughs loudly. “I’m not dead!”

Hole clangs in from the side and lifts the book from Cá Bảy Màu’s long fingers. It holds the leather shakily between its wired clamps. “Look at my hands,” it reads. “Please look at... my hands. Why can’t... you see what’s... there?”

Amara runs into the clearing breathlessly. “Don’t you dare start without me!” she calls out.

Axastyakis looks up from his work as she plops down on the flower bed beside him. “Also, hi,” she adds, grinning.

“Too late,” he says, winking down at her. “You missed all the good bits. Come here, show me a vein.”

She draws back her sleeve and winces when he plunges in the needle. His grip is steady, and her blood flows easily into the hollow bone. He withdraws the throbbing receptacle and adds it to his tools and baubles without a word, continuing his scribbling on the side of his dark cauldron.

Amara rubs her arm with her knuckles. The evening air around them flickers through the fire’s soothing warmth.

“Before you joined us,” Axastyakis tells her suddenly, “I was the runt of this little cabal.”

It’s not the sort of thing he’s likely to say, the way his skull’s pale outgrowths tower over her. She observes him closely while he squeezes droplets of his blood into the brew. He waves his hands around in knotty patterns, his charms jangling on his wrists.

“I always love a bit of witchcraft,” he says. “Back on the rock-pods, our tribes were quickly turning to the traps of rationality. Every ritual mantra explained, every drop of blood in its right place.”

She scoots a little closer to the fire, letting the dry heat of the flames caress her face. “I never knew,” she says softly. “I’d been wondering where you got the blood stuff skills to make this thing. Is that why you left?”

“Hah. No. I was happy with my life there. Proud to call the wastelands of space my home.” His fingers trace linked circle patterns in the air, orbiting a thick mist rising from the mixture. He shoves his shadow up at the high moons. “Faction Paradox did not find me. We found them. The Elders of this cohort drew attention to themselves, as always, with their grand designs and all their enigmatic prancing. All the habits they’ve lately come to regret.”

She nods.

“So, seeing their arrogance, we moved in to enslave them. I was a young hot-head then, freshly mated, barely grown into my robes.”

“Wait, really?” Amara giggles. “You tried to *enslave* the Elders?”

“We thought we could enslave every last Faction retainer. We were arrogant. And when we saw them standing in their bloodied cloaks, their bone-faced mockery of our race... we struck.” He pauses to squint at the brew’s glistening colours. “I survived. The others of my rock-pod may have fled. I wouldn’t hold it against them, though at the time, I would have

considered them dishonoured for their cowardice."

"So, what did you do?"
"I asked questions. I demanded, raucously if I recall, to know the reasons for their base imitation of my kind. At first, the Elders didn't understand, and kept me chained up as their pet." He touches a yellowed rib tied to his cloak, as if fingering a relic. "I hungered. I roared. I spat. I accused them of every mimicry under the stars. Until finally I found, buried deep within me, the willingness to accept that I was wrong. That maybe, underneath their ploys and masks, Faction Paradox was everything it claimed to be."

He grabs the pulsing needle from its holder. Drop by tiny drop, he squeezes Amara's blood into the cauldron. The colours of the witch-brew merge and darken. "So I declared myself open to their doctrines," he continues. "And in the end, I devoted myself to Paradox and to its harsh embrace."
Amara sighs, her breath mingling with the hot air. "Did you get your answer, then?"

"No." Axastyakis stirs the liquid carefully, manipulating his shadow staff to mix the blood and patterned smoke. "But I no longer seek it. I am a Cousin of our House. That's all I need to be."
"Well. I guess, yeah."

"Although some," Axastyakis adds, "consider me a novice still."
"...Mullion?"

"Oh, yes. Our paradoxical, oh-so-devout, all-knowing Cousin Mullion." He throws Amara an odd look. "Did you really rescue her?"

"Sure did." She plucks absently at some flower stems. "Hey, do you think it's all for—"
"Care to tell me your side of the story? How you avoided getting torn apart?"

"Yeah. Yeah, sure." She swallows. "We were all the way out there, her and I, beyond the limits we'd been told to stick to." Her nails cut into tiny whorls of petals. "Mullion got a bit cocky, unguarded moment, didn't realise what else was there. She was slow. I was fast. I can see them, you know. Caught a glimpse while she was still distracted. Got her out before the jaws of doom clamped shut."
Axastyakis holds her gaze a long moment. "For now, at least," he adds, turning back to his conducting. "And at least we all know which book is hers. She's as good as dead already. Perhaps if we're lucky, she'll be taken off our hands before the night is done."

Amara bites her lower lip and smiles. "Won't stop me from giving the character a go. I think I could really give her a run for her money."
"Oh, don't get me wrong," Axastyakis says. "You're more convincing in the part than she is. But the lines speak for themselves, after all."

"Thing is, do you ever feel she's kind of… overdoing it? With that see-through look and the whole other-selves-murdery crusade and all?"
"I can tell you one thing, Little Sister. She only flaunts that which she has."

A silence falls over the two, broken only by the spitting of the fire and the occasional scrimshaw bone-bead jangle.
Amara is the first to speak again. "Hey, Axastyakis," she asks softly, "do you think it's all for real?"

His eyes stay on his hands, lacing sigils through the air. "Real?"
"What's in the books, I mean." A pensive look crosses her face, and her fingers move to

adjust a small brooch on her blue tattersall wrap. “We’re all so busy treating these lines as leftover scraps, stuff that the Elders just… found. But I’ve been thinking, like... what if that’s not it?”

Axastyakis pauses in his pattern-weaving to look down at her. “Interesting,” he says.

“I mean,” she continues, “what if not all of it’s authentic? What if the Elders have padded it a bit? A made-up line here, an inventive pen stroke there. All I’m saying is, who would ever know?”

“No one,” Axastyakis agrees. “We would see the words as real, even if they were but dust spun from the Elders’ thoughts. Anything written in the books could be the echoes of our lives, sifted out of time, dissected and bound as they claim... or could be nothing but a crafty work of art.”

“Well, I know I’m not B,” Amara says, laughing. “Unless my life is *really* going tits-up at some point.”

“Hrm. I should hope not, Little Sister. I would miss who you are now. But...” he leans over the cauldron to breathe in the sweet scent. “But think on this. If what you say is true, and the lines are as likely to be made up as to be genuine… then would our little loa not be just as real as any book?”

“Woah. I think you’ve hit on something really good, there.”

“Not just a replacement of the words, in fact, but a whole new C-form entity to play with. As much a person as the untrustworthy lines of ink on paper.” He runs his tongue across his teeth. “A way to take the ritual into our own hands.”

As if prompted by his words, Amara looks down to her palms, her eyes tracing lines along her skin. “Still,” she says, “do you think it would be like a proper loa? I mean, we don’t have any of the time-stacking, the, erm…” She looks up again and flutters her fingers vaguely in his direction.

“Feedstock?”

“I guess? Like how it goes in the shanties, the... right, the *tilly-tally clusterbomb of cluttered shab-rag self, wrapped snug and thick in ground-down layers of meaning...*” She fails to find the pitch to the old song and sighs. “You know, I think this little guy won’t even fit the both of us.”

She plants her hands down on the grass, stands up and wipes the mud and squashed black petals from her skirt. “Damn it, guess I sat on my legs. They’ve gone all tingly on me.”

“You may be right,” Axastyakis says, his voice doubtful. “Two players horsing one forged loa. It might be too much for us to ask.”

Amara stamps her feet and squeezes her calves. “Ugh. Hey, you know what? You keep it, Cousin. I think I’m warming up to the books anyways.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Go for it. Leave the bits of me in there though, if you wanna. I’d be flattered.”

“Not this not this no no return not here not this rent rip,” Cá Bảy Màu drawls, one arm splayed across Amara’s waist. Her head is resting on Amara’s thigh, her legs parked on a silken pillow by the wall. At this bent angle she can only barely read the book propped up against Amara’s belly, but it seems she’s not too bothered.

Amara holds the book of A above her face, stroking Cá Bảy Màu's spine with her free hand. "I'm real. More real than any of them. I'm deathless," she reads. Her voice sounds bright and confidently soothing.

"You were right," Cá Bảy Màu tells her. "The lines match up if you're willing to look. A beautiful romance between the A-form and the B."

Amara nods, although in this position, the effect is lost. "Their lines breathe life into each other. The A and the B, the complex and the mad. United by love." She sighs dreamily. "But it's your delivery, Cousin, that really makes it *shine*. I can feel how you believe in me as A. I can see it in your eyes when we're performing." She pats Cá Bảy Màu's bum. "We've got to cherish that belief, feed it, take it all the way there. Don't you think so?"

"I do. Of course I do." Cá Bảy Màu picks up her book and raises her head. "Come on, let's move up a little."

They shift around on the sheets until they find a new jigsaw shape to lie in, Cá Bảy Màu's long legs draped across Amara's hips, their upper bodies intertwined in parallel against the silk. Both books wobble precariously on their naked ridges. They lie still for a long moment, their fingers trailing tiny figures on each other's skins.

Amara flips to a new page eventually. "Please, please no, I've only just been woven," she whispers. There's no response. Her hand moves across the curves and grooves between them, and she pokes the warm skin of her Cousin's waist. "Hey, sleepyhead, it's your line. Come on."

The only response she gets is snoring. Cá Bảy Màu's lips are in her hair.

Axastyakis stands hidden with his arms spread wide, his shadow guiding flames around his form in incurvated coils. The blood brew sears his guts and throat. On a small stone slab before him lies the book of C.

"A perceptual shift," he mutters, and the slow words hook into his tongue and nestle in his teeth. "By the rites of blood and fire, the newborn C-form loa speaks." The impulsion of the thought spreads heavily through his skull.

Its first lines fall from his dry mouth with faltering iterations. "Want," it cries, "this want — the inside want— the inside get— the get want inside get— inside her get want get claw in!" It hesitates. "The eye the gaping lady splinter digging in the lifekind gaze the parasite the blind. Distraction discord displease dishonour disrobe display disuse distance this loop."

His throat moves freely on its own now, spewing words with liquid ardour. "In stored inaction create this truth distraction," the loa grunts. "Get inside. Get inside her. Get crave tight restate her life inside."

Arms still unmoving, Axastyakis strikes to claim back his control. "Slip away," the loa whispers frenziedly, "the words slip the— words the— words the— words." It draws its breath through Axastyakis' lungs. "Slip away," it repeats, growing calmer with each syllable. "Slip. Slip away."

He threads a net of flames around it in his flesh, to bind it to his throat and tangle up its pinions. His voice clings to the separated paths. "Welcome, friend," he says with glee.

His tongue twitches and tugs. "Why am I here?" the loa asks after a moment. "What is this place?" It moves Axastyakis' eyes to his right hand, as it projects the ghostly image of a book there in his mind. "I'm not dead?" it says, its voice nearly a sob. "I'm not dead?"

In draping bias-cut cotton, Cá Bảy Màu stands grandly perched on one moss traverse edge. She holds the book of C up with a studied look. “Just like I remembered speaking them,” she reads. “You must have thought I was the world’s greatest performer!”

Mullion rolls her eyes, holding the book of B with listless apathy. “Get no no on within without,” she quotes mechanically. “Beat slip away rip open fallow cruel.” The crowd murmurs a bit among itself.

Looking around the leafy stage, Mullion sees Amara to her left and waves the book in her direction. Amara ignores her with a dour scowl, and Hole shoves a metal limb between them to secure the book instead. It parts the pages blindly for a line. “Caught!” it cries. “Torn caught!”

Axastyakis clears his throat on the traverse’s opposite side. He shows the audience his empty hands. “That’s what I am!” his mouth says. “Nothing else! And whatever else you saw in me was nothing but a lie!” The C-form lines fall rapidly from his lips, quivering only slightly on the air.

Mullion stares at him as though he’s grown a second face.

“Gather round! Friends, Houses, enemies! Attend my tale! The magical, mythical, thrilling adventures of Hell’s champion Lord Grinning Soul, mighty vanquisher of the Ravenous Purple Glitter Dragon!”

“Okay, you just made *all* of that up,” Amara says with a big smile. She snatches the book of A from Cá Bảy Màu’s hands. “Yep. Yep, you sure did.”

He laughs. “Well, if Ax can do it, so can I.”

“Mullion’s going to have your head if you go off-script too, you know.”

“Jumped-up little stickybeak can have it.” Cá Bảy Màu runs a hand through his hair and tucks some grey-black strands behind an ear. “Mine’s prettier than the one she’s got, that’s for sure.”

“No argument from me.” Amara puts the book down on the pebbled beach, leaning back on her hands to watch woolly clouds drift over her. A little ways away, she can hear Hole lumbering through sand and grit, bellowing out the lines of C.

Cá Bảy Màu points at her chest. “Hey, I’ve been wanting to ask forever… what’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“That carnelian brooch you’ve got on. You’re always wearing that, even when it clashes with your…” He hesitates a moment. “Well, with your everything.”

“Oh, that.” Her eyes unfocus slightly. “Just a thingy from this TV show I watched as a kid, back on Earth. Sci-fi rubbish. Pretty dull compared to the real space adventuring thing.”

“Must have aired before I was even born.”

“Perils of being from a stupider time than me,” Amara teases. “When it comes to sci-fi rubbish, nothing beats the nineties. I guess I just keep this on because, you know, it’s the only thing I’ve got that’s survived Faction life so far.” She rubs the pin’s rough surface with her thumb. “It’s not as bright as it used to be, I think. Getting a bit old and brownish. Probably cheap stuff anyway.”

“Retro. Awesome.” He peers closer at the design. “It looks almost like a little eye.”

“Heh. Guess it does.” She lifts up Cá Bảy Màu’s chin with one small finger. “Not as pretty as yours, though.”

Cá Bảy Màu pulls a face before planting a soft kiss on her nose.

“I’ll take this, then.” A trussed shadow falls across them. They look up to see the sun’s bright glare through Mullion, holding up the book of A. “If you’re too busy snuggling.”

“Come on, Mullion,” Cá Bảy Màu says mischievously. “I thought you Homeworlders liked to watch?”

“Little Sister,” Mullion scoffs, pointedly ignoring Cá Bảy Màu, “a word of warning. You may think you’re so brave, swooping in like some great heroine. But you are still a fledgling novice. Remember your rank.”

Cá Bảy Màu rolls his eyes. “Okay, we get it, yeah? You’re big and beautiful and all-knowing and oh, you’re *super* scary.” His fingers flutter at her in mock horror. “And now that you’ve practically emptied out your timeline, all that’s left of you is your own ego, right?”

“Don’t try to speak for her.” Mullion peers harshly at Amara. “Is that how you see me too, child?”

“Oh, now I’m a child, is it? Wait, oh, wait a minute though, I get it!” Amara clasps her hands together. “This has got nothing to do with how I saved you, does it? Is this because you can’t stand to watch us together? Oh my God, that’s it, isn’t it?”

“No.”

“Because in all this time I’ve known you, Mullion, you’ve never been this much of a bitch. Never ever. But watching us fall in love these past couple of weeks, that’s *really* pushing your buttons, isn’t it?”

“I’m done.” Clutching the book to her chest, Mullion turns to leave.

“Hey, Miss Mullion,” Cá Bảy Màu calls after her, “why are you acting brand new?”

Mullion stops in her tracks and twists around to face him. “I left the Homeworld when the War was just a whisper through the spheres,” she says, her voice rising. “Before the Eleven-Day Empire was eaten, before the drafting of the mock Venue Accords. I fought the sick Shed Scales alongside runagates and aconites. I wear the anathematic fossils of my tainted Homeworld kin! And you, Cousin, you *dare* to call me new!” She throws them both a brutal look, then storms away.

Cá Bảy Màu shrugs and slings an arm around Amara’s shoulders. “Hit a nerve, I guess.” He stares pensively at Mullion’s retreating form. “You never did tell me your version of what happened.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Amara says. She leans into his touch, wriggling against his ruffled shirt. “Long story short, she went all the way out there up in space, way beyond the limits we were told to stick to. Tried to kill one of her own selves again or something. So, she got a bit cocky, unguarded moment, didn’t realise what else was out there. Nearly got herself scooped up and gobbled down. I can see them, you know. So I saved her arse. The end.”

“Ah. Right. Yeah, jealous alright.” Cá Bảy Màu frowns. “But not because of me, I should think. I wonder. Yeah, I wonder…”

“Anyhow, Mullion isn’t taking the ritual very well, is she? Nothing like me and you.” She strokes his arm softly. “We’re like this little island of calm together, compared to her.”

“I’ve never seen her take anything well. She’s up in her own head too much. Even before

you came and joined us, that big death thing of hers was already her whole life. Or lack thereof." Cá Bảy Màu rests his cheek against Amara's curls and sighs. "She makes such an exquisite corpse," he mutters.

Amara's laugh sounds a bit perfunctory.

Across the shore, Hole's limbs whirr into motion with grating effort. It watches Mullion leave, repeating "big" and "emptied" and "big" again.

"Not here not something comes dug in in in in in in in in in in gone!" Cá Bảy Màu reads, every bit the classic diseuse in her soft pink áo dài. She faces this night's audience with absolute conviction. A crowd of drooping stems waves at her from the stalls.

Amara holds up the book of A. "Want this," she quotes emphatically from the page. Coming up behind her, Mullion tries to snatch the book out of her hands, but Amara ducks and runs toward a wing. "When I was young," she yells out, "I looked through eternity's eye, and eternity created me!"

Mullion faces the audience, displaying her empty hands. "When I was young," she echoes defiantly in her most booming voice, "I looked through eternity's eye, and eternity created me!"

Hole shambles into the spotlight beside her, clutching the book of C between tight clamps. "My past slipping away," it reads with glitching sine wave tones, "and if there's... no other way... out, the only... way... left." It stops short of finishing the line.

None of them notice Axastyakis standing at the back, his mouth shoving out words in a compulsive whisper. "Created me," his voice insists. "Created me."

Mullion stops just outside the entrance to Cá Bảy Màu's little nest. The room is curtained off with tasselled batik fabrics, sounds of conversation drifting out through clouds of copal incense.

"Thought Axastyakis was done with books," Amara's voice mutters.

"Well, he was very insistent about having a look at the book of A just now. I told him to get lost. It's yours and besides, he's got his own little plaything these days."

"His own perfect little C," Amara agrees. "Better than the first. More vivid. Much more talkative." She sighs longingly. "It's so cool how strongly he believes in it, you know? We really ought to try much harder."

As quietly as she can, Mullion shifts her sight to nullify the obstructing walls and textiles. Her mind's eye is met with cross-legged figures sitting skin to skin in lantern-lit display.

Amara breathes in the pungent smoke. "Do you love me?"

"I do, you little dag. I do."

She holds her book in front of her face. "Do you love me now?" she quotes, her voice hinting a smile.

Cá Bảy Màu opens the book of B. "Run sky break flight to shatter shun cut loose," he reads earnestly. "Pretty sure that means: dear A, I love you to little bits."

Amara's eyes peer out over the hidebound edge. "Yep, it does," she says, before lowering

the book and leaning over to kiss his mask.

"Hey, Amara? Know what I wonder?"
"Hmm?" She moves her mouth along his neck, licking down the pattern of his veins.

He closes his eyes languidly. "What do you think it's all for? The… ah. The ritual, the recon… reconstitution of the three?"
"Didn't you hear?" She moves her free hand to a more distracting spot. "The Peace, of course. Always the Peace."

"You know what I mean. Where is it all going? When do we know we're done? We've been at it for at least a month, what does it— *ah*. Okay. Yeah. *Fuck*, that feels like you've had years of practice. Um. Mean to reconstitute a form?"
She looks up at him, her eyes flashing annoyance. "What are you on about?"

"I've been watching, and I've been thinking." He angles down his head to watch her through his fish mask's gaping sockets. "Do you… erm. Do you think that maybe, someday, Mullion will become A? For real, I mean?"
Amara wriggles up and wraps her arms around his neck, the book still dangling loosely from her fingers. "For you, I'm A," she says, her mouth against his ear. "Lines or no lines. Whatever else she is, that caged-up crone will never be as brilliant."

Mullion stalks off when they stop speaking.

"—grand celebration of the Peace!"

Downstage in his gabardine coat and mismatched black fedora, Cá Bảy Màu adopts a well-rehearsed noir slouch and stares up at his audience of cobalt crows. The book of A has landed in his hands.
Just as he opens his mouth to cut through all the stony cawing, lines tumble loudly from Axastyakis' throat. "Please, no!" the loa shouts. "I can't see you! Are you me? The other me? The eyes don't work! No! I can't see you! No!"

Across the twiggy stage, Cá Bảy Màu catches Axastyakis' expression. He looks down at the words of A inked on the page, and up, and down and up once more. When Mullion plucks the book out of his fingers, he stays stock-still in wonder.

The low sun after their performance, young and eager in its spin, turns the grassland a burnt orange. Beyond a waveless lake, the hills surrounding them lie stark against the sky.

Still in his trench coat and black hat, Cá Bảy Màu stalks over to the others, Axastyakis in tow. He ignores the lines yelled out by Mullion and Hole and heads straight for the book of A, held lightly in Amara's hands.
"Amara," Cá Bảy Màu says, "Axastyakis and I have been talking. Something's wrong. Like, very wrong. Listen."

She frowns at him, her fingers drifting down to smooth her milky cloak and skirts. "What do you mean, wrong?"
"Listen. Just listen for a moment."

Axastyakis, eyes closed, places himself before her. “What are you doing to this body? Oh, no, no, no, I know who you are! I know what you are!” the loa cries.

Cá Bảy Màu snatches the book abruptly from her hand, leafing through the pages until he finds the line. “Look,” he says, holding the words up to Amara. “There it is. Written exactly as spoken. Do the next one, Ax.”

“Paradox anxiety,” Axastyakis’ mouth sings out. “Cries spouting from her throat!”

Behind him, Hole and Mullion look up from their rehearsals and lay down their books to join the group.

Amara blinks. “I don’t understand what—”

“There, right there!” Cá Bảy Màu points at the letters, inked on the page in perfect replica of Axastyakis' words.

“But that’s—”

Axastyakis opens his eyes to look at her. “My loa’s life is in my mouth,” he says. “My own little C-form cast, made from your blood as much as mine. So, Little Sister, can you tell me why the words it spouts are written in the book of A?”

Before Amara can respond, Mullion interjects, her rows of teeth aimed at Axastyakis. “That thing you made was wrong,” she blurts out. “It’s stilted, Cousin. It’s profane.”

Axastyakis sneers back at her. “What’s it to you, then?”

“I don’t know how you *dare* to call that tulpic miscarriage a loa,” Mullion says. “I don’t see why you’re doing this to us! We were told to read the lines, and nothing more!”

“Oh, come on,” Cá Bảy Màu begins, “Just give it a rest—”

“You don’t see it, do you?” Mullion snaps suddenly. “All of this. The rituals, the books, the endless sham performances. They’re for me.”

Cá Bảy Màu laughs. “They what?”

“This is my chance to prove how far I’ll go. This is my test!” Mullion’s eyes gleam liquid in their sockets, her voice choked up with anger. “All these years, all these lives, I’ve been hunting my selves down and firing shadows down their throats. Unravelling myself from time.”

Her words are met by a stunned silence. Amara stares at her with disbelief. “That’s really what you think, Mullion? That this is all some big chance for you to… to get a big gold star reward?”

“I should have been made Mother when I joined the Faction, as was my House-bred right. I should have been. I *needed* to.” Her voice betrays a brutal longing. “But I was flawed. I knew that as they did. I was too cowardly for the Elders, too common. I had to prove myself.”

Amara’s eyes trail down to Mullion’s glazed insides. “Oh, I bet you did,” she mutters.

“I need to embrace my fate as A. To abandon myself to it in full.” Mullion looks around at the others. “When I killed my first me, I felt linearity slip away, and I knew that I was doing the right thing. The approving looks that shone behind the Elders’ masks. T-the feeling in my gut that I could prove my worth. I knew I would be favoured someday, if only I could *show* them. Just how much I loathe the anchored thread. How deeply I love Paradox.” She balls up her trembling fists. “So I killed. I maimed! I destroyed one part of myself after another, until there was only my next life left to drain!”

Her lungs press up against her ribs in heaving sobs. She draws in a laboured breath. “And then you came along,” she croaks.

Amara's eyes shoot up to meet hers. "What?"

"I still don't know what you were doing out there when you saved me, Little Sister. Yes, it took me a long time to realise, but you had no reason to be there, did you? They wanted me, and me alone. Because of what I'd made myself into. I was so thinly spun, so tempting. S-so shamefully blind to what was coming. And you, trailing my footsteps, waiting for some opportune moment to conduct your business. With what, Amara? Or with whom?"

"I never—"

"And when you rescued me, I lost it all. I couldn't prove my worth. All I'd worked on, all these lifetimes, fell like refuse from my hands. The shame of it. Saved by a Little Sister. By a novice! A mortal tot, not even fit to speak the Grandfather's name! It didn't matter after all how many parts of me I'd slain. I couldn't prove my worth! I might as well have stayed domed in for all eternity, denied the path of Paradox, and I'd have never had to face the humiliation that you put me through that day! Oh, a true heroine you are, Amara, a noble saviour of our bl—"

She stops mid-word. By the calm lake beyond the grassland, gleaming in the sun, a figure stands and watches. From this distance, its wet features are thick brush strokes of bone.

Mullion's hands cover her mouth in silent shock. Following her gaze, Axastyakis gasps and elbows Cá Bảy Màu.

"Thank you, my life's thief," Mullion whispers, "for this delicious sudden gift." Her grinning teeth open in choked laughter. "Do you know," she tells Amara, "do you know… that's the part I never got before."

Amara's face lights up with recognition. "That's—"

"My next me. The only one I've yet to kill." Mullion's shadow moves to span a narrow line across a flatbow shape. Cast on the ground before her, the layered bone spokes of her drawing hand pull back the shadow string.

A dark blotch falls across the ground from just behind her. It swallows up the bow and the caged sunlight patches on the grass. Her eyes still anchored straight ahead, Mullion fails to spot the shifting shadow overtaking hers.

Amara flings herself onto the dirt just in time to avoid Hole, its limbs whirling in frenzy, as it throws itself on Mullion's back.

Its frame brings down its Cousin, ripping open her armour and her chest cavity with its shadow's hooks. Cá Bảy Màu and Axastyakis cry out in horror as Mullion's mask and face are crushed under its weight. They both move quickly to drag Hole off of her, but already its gaseous programs seep into her core. Its clay and metal limbs fall lifelessly apart on top of hers.

Amara scrambles up, knocking her book across the grass. She shoves herself against Axastyakis' back. "Get off!" she screams, "I need to—"

"Stop her!" Cá Bảy Màu yells, rushing away from the two broken bodies.

Before Amara can touch Mullion's corpse, Axastyakis grabs her by her waist and drags her to the ground. "Stay!" he hisses. "It's starting!"

"*No*," Amara wails, "no no no you don't understand!" She beats his arms hard, trying to break free of his hold. "This wasn't meant to happen! Let me go! Let me *go!*"

Through Mullion's clear chest, thick twisting vines surge from her frantically beating hearts. They rend the soil around her corpse and lick at Amara's outstretched fingertips.

The tangled mass girdles the body as Mullion's organs shift, enveloping Hole's triple forms and sealing up her skin and bones.
The watching woman's glasslike face bursts screaming into life through Mullion's flesh. Her voice mingles with Amara's ragged cries.

Axastyakis unhands Amara when the vines wither and fade. "No," she gasps, dropping to her knees by Mullion's side. "Too late. I'm too late. I'm too late I'm too late." Her fingers run frantically across her clothes, dipping into folds and pockets.
"So beautiful," Axastyakis grunts. "Always hoped I'd see her renew someday." He touches Amara's shoulder gently. "It's okay," he tells her. "She's going to be okay. We've just got to get Hole out of there, find it a stopgap capsule for a while. Then we'll—"

It's as far as he gets before Amara guts him. His entrails drop wetly to the ground, followed seconds later by his body. Behind them, Cá Bảy Màu cries out in helpless shock.
"Come on, come on… just reset," Amara whispers. Her hands cradle a smoking blaze-burst gun.

Inside Mullion's twin bone frames, one rib cage shattered and one knotted shut, the gas clouds spread across her glistening innards and thrust themselves into her throat and lungs. Her screaming promptly stops.
"I don't understand," Cá Bảy Màu says. "I don't understand." He kneels by Axastyakis' side and grabs at the spilled organs on the grass. "I don't, I… Amara?" His eyes try to meet hers, but she stares gaping at Mullion's form as it throws off Hole's appendages and wobbles to its feet.

"No space," the teetering body moans. "Sought space no space. No space. No space no space. No space!" The dusty gas inside its clefts and cracks surges around its pounding hearts. It turns its glass eyes to Cá Bảy Màu. "You called her emptied! Big emptied big emptied big emptied—"
"Come on," Amara shouts, "I killed him! Just do it! Reset! Aren't you watching?"

Standing up, Cá Bảy Màu grabs at her sleeve, the wet goo on his hands staining the pale fabric. "Listen to me! Amara! Reset what?"
Her fingers let the gun fall to the grass. "Reset," she mumbles, pliant and slack as Cá Bảy Màu drags her to her feet. Behind her, Mullion's body trips on a discarded metal limb.

Cá Bảy Màu takes Amara's face between his hands. Her skin beneath his own is slicked with fragrant blood. "Talk," he says. "Now."
Hobbling slowly on all fours, Mullion's puppet body starts to wail. "Away," it cries, "away..."

"I was so close," Amara whispers. "So close this time."
"Get... rip away..."

"I could have crawled right inside her. But you," she says, "you and Axastyakis, you made me fail. You did."
The body crashes to the grass, triple gas wisps stretched toward its brain's clear stems. "Out!" it bellows, its fingers clawing wildly at its stomach. "From the welded… fold… away…"

Amara pulls Cá Bảy Màu's hands down from her cheeks. "You don't know what it was like," she says. "That first night on the stage, when they… when I didn't know where I was. The… the lights were in my face. There was a book in my hand and it had my words in it, my life just scrawled across the pages." She looks down at Axastyakis' corpse. "And I

told all of you that night, everything, right in front of that stupid crowd."
Cá Bảy Màu follows her gaze to the bloodied grass, then quickly looks away again. "Amara, I—"

"And the moment I stopped talking… back at the start, book in my hand. And again. And again." She folds her arms around herself. "So I played along after a while. Read my lines just like I remembered speaking them. You must have thought I was the world's greatest performer."
He stares at her, eyes wide. "You're C?"

"Loop after loop," Amara continues numbly, "I became C, because of how you all believed in me. Holding myself in my hands. Reciting my bits and pieces for months on end, until I became both of me at once. And every time, the moment I was thick enough with it, the Elders came and plucked me out and made me…" She breathes in sharply, her eyes darting back to the dark guts splayed across the ground. "Oh. Oh, God, that's what happened. Because you know who I am. It was never Mullion's book. The thing, the fake me—"
"You trained me to love you." Cá Bảy Màu blinks back his rage. "And I did. I do."

"—the loa, it'll always have become—"
"To believe in everything you are as A."

A long silence falls between them.
"Up up up find path find pass shove tear through throat out out tight burst gone," Mullion's corpse sputters, propping itself up again. It crawls away on wrongly angled legs.

Amara wipes her mouth. "Mullion thought I rescued her, back then. The arrogant cunt." Her head stays low. "We were all the way out there. She was stalking her own self. I was on her trail. Truth is, I just thought I was the only one hunting her. Didn't see what was coming until it was too late." She rubs her cheek hard with her clenched knuckles, dragging stripes of red along her jaw.
"I got in the way. Lost part of myself, a big part of me torn off while she fled. And I was found out by the Elders. Placed here in the cycle. To have that single chunk of biodata fattened up and torn away, again and again." Her voice chokes up. "The perfect paradox bait."

Without warning, she lets herself drop to the grass. Her fingers find the gun and curl around its cooling metal. She aims it at Cá Bảy Màu's chest before he can reach out, scrambling up again to face him.
"I see," he says. More than anything, he sounds tired. He doesn't bother moving. "A traitor, then."

She tries to steady her arm, her eyes fixed on his. "So many false starts. So many chances to get it right. As long as I don't tell the truth or murder any of you, I'm good. No restarts as long as I behave." Her whole back shivers. "Until now. I'm still standing. Guess the Elders are having a blast up there, watching us. Wherever they've fucked off to."
She jams the barrel hard against her temple. The moment its rim hits her skin, Cá Bảy Màu's shadow leaps the gap between them and cleaves the gun in two. Its pieces tumble from her hand toward the ground.

"No," he says simply. The catch in his voice belies his blank expression. He draws his shadow back across the grass. "Don't make me watch you die. Not after all this."
Amara stands staring at her empty fingers, moving them back and forth in disbelief. She lifts her head to look at Cá Bảy Màu.

He takes a wary step toward her. “Who made you—”
“I killed myself,” she tells him softly. “Stabbed and hung and burned and shot myself. Over and *over* and I lived. Every time. Back on the stage. Holding my book.” Through her tears, she manages a wan smile. “I’m sure it made the Elders happy, too. Nice little death paradox. Just a yummy topping for the time-thickening.”

The sun’s edge touches the horizon. A muted pounding starts up in the distant hills.
“Amara,” Cá Bảy Màu says, “I need to know. Why all this? Why play me the way you did?”

Her legs tremble beneath her. “Never got this far before. I thought I’d get a loa to replace me as C. Get a stupid nerd to believe in me as A, to make me into...” She laughs bitterly. “Well, I thought wrong. But we all did, right? We all figured the real A was Mullion.”
To her side, Mullion’s drifting corpse cries out in agony. The pounding from the distance moves in closer.

Amara holds up her hands, tangled biodata filaments spun out between her fingers. “I can see my timelines,” she says. “The way none of you can. Tried showing you. Wriggled my fingers in front of all your faces. I guess... this was my last chance.” Her voice is rough. “The threads are breaking. Soon, they’ll snap.” Swallowing hard, she moves to touch Cá Bảy Màu’s cheeks. He lets her.
“They made me into a ticking bomb,” she says gently. “But I thought I could still escape. Down into Mullion. Thought I could succeed where I failed before. So much empty space in her life to hide in. I would become A, and she’d always have been A, and we’d both be nice and cosy together as A and I’d be saved because that’s what they *promised* me.”

“Wait. Wait wait wait.” He grabs her wrists, his nails digging in hard. “Who promised you? Not the Elders?”
She winces. “No, you idiot. The enemy.”

Some yards away, Mullion’s amalgamate tears off a floppy arm.
“Before the loops, before everything. I...” Amara’s breathing quickens. “Let me go!” she cries. “I don’t want to go on! I don’t want this! I don’t *want* this!”

Cá Bảy Màu’s shadow coils around her legs. It stretches itself across her spine and shoulders, locking her in place against him.
She throws her head to the sky. “Come on, then, you bastards!” she sobs. “This can’t have been your goal! This can’t be better than every loop you’ve reset! I killed! I talked! Why don’t you end it all?”

The only response comes from Axastyakis’ dead mouth by her feet. “Want this,” the loa gurgles.
“Tell me,” Cá Bảy Màu says quietly. “Is it true? That the enemy has its own Eye on Earth?”

Amara blinks hard. “I heard the enemy speak to me of eternity.” Her words are tinged with reverence. “It’s said that we sustain our history through their gaze. That their gaze was moulded by the ripples of our history. I saw them, I know I did, and they saw me and I saw them as they saw me and they made me whole. God, it always feels so good to tell you.” She licks wet salt from her lips. “So I hunted Mullion out there. To burrow into her. To become their rep inside a Homeworld Mother. She would have been made Mother in the end, a proper Elder like the rest of them. I’d have… I’d have been the enemy’s all-seeing eye in Faction ranks. And from there, what’s in our Earth would...”
His grip tightens on her wrists. In the small space left between them, his shadow slips

over her brooch and crawls toward her neck.

"I know the enemy can save me from the cycle, if I..." She makes no effort to pull away. "I know they have the power. I just know. I could have ripped apart her timeline and poured myself inside. I thought I felt her whole life tear at me. And then Hole just… opened up her skin and bones like it was nothing. And… and I failed. Oh, God, I failed."
They stand there a long moment. The rhythmic pounding seeps into the air around them.

"Something's coming," Cá Bảy Màu whispers. "Do you think it's the Elders? Come to fetch your pretty little body for their bait?"
"At last," Amara says. Her shoulders drop against the shadow binding. "I thought…"

Cá Bảy Màu's eyes dart across the darkening sky. His voice shakes softly when he asks, "Amara, what if it's the enemy that's coming?"
"No," Amara says. Her gaze is locked behind him. "You're wrong. Not the Elders, not the enemy. Oh, God." With a sudden burst of strength, she tears her hands away from his. "Run. Please, Cá Bảy Màu, get out. Now. Please! Please, just *run!*"

Going Once, Going Twice

Jacob Black

The Shadows' Overture

There was a Spire built from night, clinging to a rocky shore in a forgotten day. A lighthouse silhouette, solid but gnarled. The sky was a boiling Empire red, and dipped to the horizon in a few miles of stolen concept. Sometimes abstracts and sinister blurs would race across the sky and vanish into the underworld beyond. The Faction lived in the Spire, a small cabal of the exiled House. It was a bolthole from the Empire's death. A few dozen Cousins, a few older Siblings, Mother and Father. A family.
The Godfather Auteur, locked away in the lantern room, laughed.

He was writing frantically, pausing only to hack out a ball of bloody gunk dislodged from his cackling. Papers and books covered the floor of the lantern room, all of them dripping with his sprawling and inconsistent handwriting. The shelved walls were full to bursting with tomes, scrolls, ancient parchments, animal skins, and VHS tapes.
Auteur was crafting a few stories at once, tying some plot threads of completely separate events together like the shoelaces of a schoolyard enemy.

The Jackal and the Falcon, eyes gleaming green, wrestling in the oxidised dirt, knocking the very world from its temporal foundations, making it uncertain…
The Warrior, caught in the last world-quakes of that battle…

The Brothers of the Faction, armoured and skeletal, helpless as the timeships lowered, as space crackled and burst and time froze like cement…
A broken heart…

The snake.
Auteur was not a person, not as such. He never had been, coming from the Homeworld of Chronarchs, weaved into parchment flesh and creaking bones. But now that yellowed skin was stripped from his frame, sinews still reaching and grasping for their outer layer. His muscles flexed, bled. His shadow was cloaked around him, a new skin, and it shifted with every movement. Orange eyes bulged in the sockets of his skull, clean of all but a few purple veins, his own face made into his distinctive mask.

Loa circled the Spire. They were vultures, hyenas, and loaches carved from minutes and stitched from years. One perched on the railing of the lantern room, paused, and crept, dripped, and whispered inside.
Godfather Auteur's gloom skin rippled. The loa was resuming a story — juicy and tender possibilities melting off the bone. Auteur giggled, his shadow skin coughed, and he began to write something new.

Mother and Father watched him, eyeless and breathless, dry bone masks the only solidarity of their haze. They looked to be part of the Spire itself, their roughly human bodies cut from the shadow. The brief glimpses of something red and pulsating beneath the shaded cloaks were evidence that they were once more *finished*.
Now, they served the Spire.

Even they had forgotten what they once were. They barely remembered their days in the Empire, and were only able to glimpse brief pictures of induction, of dancing with the shadows deep

within the nit and grit of the Eleven Days.
They were assigned to be the forepersons of the Spire, guarding the lone tenant, before the Spire leaked into their ears and rotted the wet and pink inside them. Their skin faded, their histories dissolved. Only instinct and loyalty throbbed behind the sockets of their skulls (Father's a bleached Argentavis pulled from the mire of extinction, Mother's a weather-beaten Haast's eagle). Loyalty to the House of Paradox, their familial Faction.

Auteur chortled as an event finished itself, ink spinning off his pen and drying on the page. His work was a chaotic congregation of circles and swirls, planetary configurations and temporal orbits invoking words, images, songs. A language printed on History's programming, all but forgotten by the very temporals who crafted it.
Auteur was the master of a forgotten art. The Homeworld's Observer Effect was the blessing and curse of those at the Spiral's heart. The unpromised events that bob on the surface of frothing causality could be forced into crystallised guarantee by the denizens of the Great Houses.

Auteur's hearts beat in time with the taps of his fingers on the floor, a rhythm of four as he hummed a forgotten theme tune. The Mother and Father watched as events began to follow their prompting, and they thought towards their mission.
"Gustav," Father rasped. "We need the strength, we need the loyalty in case the bonding ceremony goes wrong."

"Mm," Mother considered, turning her mask to her comrade. "The artefact might offend his sensibilities. He claims loyalty to the Family, swears by it, but race memory runs deep. Religion is powerful, even when proven temporally unfixed."
"I disagree." Father hated and loved and felt nothing for his fellow. "His faith and belief were shattered in his induction ceremony. He saw the truth. He is loyal now only to the Family." The grating of his voice soured with something like cruelty. "He will obey us without question because we are the reason he is real."

"Disillusionment is not the same as loyalty."
"You do not trust that Gustav's loyalty is genuine?"

Mother held her head high. "I see his loyalty as a survival tactic. It is not something we have earned, it is a front to ensure his survival."
"He *will* obey."

"Even if you are right, falling out with concepts and gods is easier when you cannot see them. He may find himself face to face with one. I think he will react far differently than you say. His behavior during his induction and during the mission will be two different animals."
"*He* is an animal," Father said. "Nothing more than a lizard. He doesn't have the brains to think like that."

Mother considered. "He will want to take Little Brother Kifah with us. The bond between the two has strengthened since Intrepid's capture."
"I think that will be acceptable. The Little Brother has proven himself quite dependable. No doubt he has also been awaiting an opportunity to prove himself ready for a higher station."

"Kifah's strength and dependability are not to the Family," Mother asserted. "They are to Intrepid. Intrepid is gone."
Father was silent in turn. Auteur coughed and looked at them.

"*Vous savez*," he said, slurring, shadow lips smacking, skull smiling larger than static bone should, "*on peut simplement leur mentir*."
The two Spirekeepers cocked their heads. They did not understand French.

"Pardon. I said we can just tweak the truth."
Father and Mother merely cocked their heads in the other direction.

Auteur pointed his pen at Mother. "You worry your tank will be pissed when he learns what

you're after. You also think Kifah doesn't give a shit about the Faction." He then turned his unwavering gaze to Father. "And you're an asshole who doesn't give the poor lady enough credit for the fact that she's smarter than you. Lady. Erm. Lady? Previously known as?"
Mother said nothing, but Father's shadow bristled a little.

"I think the lizard will do as he's told," Auteur nodded, "but Kifah may certainly need a little more motivation to help us along." He linked one of the circles, three constellations orbiting each other, to the centre of splotched ink. "And a bit of lying."
"I despise this," Father snarled. "Catering to the temperaments of our charges. They should obey us implicitly. They are still the lessers of the Family and we should not need to be wary of what they want."

"Beggars can't be choosers," Auteur whispered, his shadow twisting around his bones excitedly.
"Speak up!" Mother and Father said in time, hating and loving each other for it.

"We are going extinct. The Faction, the House. You don't have charges that are going to follow you blindly. You don't have the Grandfather's chosen. You have scared people. You're not going to have blind obedience. Deal with it." His teeth clicked and his smile impossibly widened. "Besides, what could go wrong?"
Away from even Auteur's attention, a wet and inky narrative that snaked through paragraphs of history on one of the pages writhed and hissed. A loa outside the spire devoured another with a shriek of passing moments and a warp of space.

Child of Earth

In the Spire's belly, Little Brother Kifah dreamed.

He hated dreaming. It was always nothing but sour tastes of nightmares and memories. Worse still, the songs hummed in the Spire's crevices, the gentle cooing whispers from the floors, habitually crawled into someone's head, stirred things, thickened unwanted hurts and heartbreaks.
Kifah hated dreaming, because the dreams always brought him Home. Home, a hot and dusty world at the edge of the little empire that remained of the Arab League, far away from the dead Earth. He saw Home when the timeships came. The world burnt and blackened, blood and smoke thick, the heat heavy on his brown skin. Silvered ash was a choking fog. The scarlet sun glinted on the fading hides of the steepled ships as they sang their wheezing chorus.

He dreamt of the boy, wrapped in black, gunmetal eyes peering from a bone mask.
Brother Intrepid. Smiling, despite himself. Reaching out to Kifah. "Come with me."

Kifah dreamed more, of his induction. The chamber of Family, the howling walls of shadows. He was petrified, sniffling. Intrepid lifted his mask from his face across the room, winked. Smiled. Spoke without speaking.
"Just look at me."

More dreams, dead memories reanimated and burred. They formed in the fog, passing into another. Kifah gritted his teeth and faced the One-Armed Man. He would not have passed induction if not for Intrepid's smile.
Gentle touches during rituals, a velvet glove on a burnt hand. Hugs becoming longer, smiles becoming sweeter. Intrepid holding him as they looked at the red above them, felt the dark around them, heard the loa flapping and slithering. Awkwardly clanging their skull masks together when they tried to kiss. Silently protecting each other from the wails in the Spire, telling

stories, sharing ideas, desires. Hearing Intrepid's heartsbeats in his chest.

"Hybrids aren't fashionable in 'polite' society," Intrepid said. The image was sharper, but the voice far away and small. "So, after a semester or two at the Academy, they kicked me out."
Intrepid was lithe, more fluid than solid. He was a dark shape against scarlet haze as Kifah watched him stretch his muscles. He would lift his arms to pull back long hair that was now only short and curly. Snickers in the Spire's corners implied that Intrepid had changed in his travels from Homeworld to Spire. A trail of golden light and morphing bodies, girl to boy to man.

Kifah words are cold and heavy on his tongue. "Mother and Father say that the Houses attacked my home because of what it was doing to us. Changing our biodata to be… different."
"That's why you survived," Intrepid smiled. He had perfect teeth except for the left front, which was chipped. It was cute. "Your biodata shielded you from having your history removed."

Leaning on his chest, hearing the beats again. Lulled. Warm.
But, as often happens to dreams in the Spire, they twisted, blackened, became as poisoned and hurt as the tower. They weren't memories now, but images built from the battle reports. The Spire, giggling like a child pulling the wings off a fly, painted the battle on Kifah's eyelids.

Intrepid, forced into the skulltrooper armour, running from the timeships that ripped their gold and silver into real space, trumpeting their arrival, blaring their war cries. Cousins and Siblings were dashed to pieces by tendrils of raw yesterdays as the Wave closed in.
Intrepid, turning to Kifah, as if from behind a screen, lifting his mask. His face bloodied, filthy. Unafraid. Smiling, the same smile as the first day, the same smile as during the induction. The smile shared under the covers and between kisses. Mouth opening, silent words.

"I love you."
The scene changed. The burning fields cracked, folding up like a map, crumbling into self. When it was a condensed ball of space, it flashed a bright blue. A blinding sphere. The smell of Time, stilled dust wet with fresh blood, dripped from the rays of light.

Kifah reached for the other end of the bed, finding nothing but the emptiness of Intrepid's absence. In the dream, the absence shifted, a shape of nothing, a snake wiggling in the hollow chill. It wrapped around the sphere of light, choking the frozen faces and fluxing moments.
Green eyes opened in the nothing, neon colour pulsing in the absence, and a formless mouth hissed.

Mother watched Kifah as he dreamed, forming herself from the Spire's wall, skull tearing through the surface. She readied to wake him and give him his mission.

Son of Mars

Brother Gustav dreamed, curled in his corner of the Spire. Icicles dangled from the ceiling into a chandelier, while frost dusted the floor and his single piece of furniture. Not even in his sleep did he remove his armour, and its dark green carapace glistened with grime.
He loved dreaming. It was the only time he could see Home.

Home was not the angry storm red that raged outside the Spire, but the colour of rust. Fields and mountains and valleys of rusted earth, like the entire world was carved from steel and left in the rain — the rain that no longer fell from the arid, empty sky. His claw scraped at the frost as he dreamed of his brood. Fighting and playing with his brothers and sisters in the nest, spying on other families clinging to the combs of the hive. In the dream, he saw the swords, the rituals. The armies of emerald hulks marching, the clans gathering in an ocean of green armour.

As happens in the Spire, the dreams turned to nightmares.

The Jackal, giant and volcanic, legs smashing through Olympus Mons. The Falcon, wingspan longer than the sky, cry shrill enough to shatter air.
Father watched as Gustav shook in his sleep. The alien growled and roared as the Falcon and the Jackal slashed at each other, brawling, kicking and cutting in the bloodstained rust of home. Their rage was rich and boiling, like the Empire red of the Spire's sky.

The Jackal looked at Gustav, naked as the armour crumbled like flaking mud, his scaled skin flaring out in the biting wind. The Jackal spat a chunk of the Falcon into the dirt, licked its lips, and grinned. The sky cracked, broken by the beating of the Falcon's wings.
"You know you're not real, right?" the Jackal said, in the torn rasp of Father.

Something ancient, a freezing absence in space that snaked through and around the chasms, formed from the broken sky above the Falcon and the Jackal and hissed.
Gustav launched awake a moment before the bloodied jaws closed over him. Father looked down, literally and figuratively, barely disguised hate in his choked whisper.

"Get up and meet Mother and I in the main hall. There is an assignment we need to discuss."

Tell it on the Mountain

The news of the Peace had spread quickly. In the dusty corners of the Spiral Politic, words of Armistice and Ceasefire were whispered in dark abbeys and cathedrals built of glass and silent vows. Hieroglyphs carved themselves into ancient rock faces in History's adolescence.

Those higher up on the Spiral Politic's ladder understood and took notice of these signs. Perhaps expectedly, if no less aggravatingly, the Homeworld had not yet addressed the situation. Regardless, people were beginning to make their moves. Criminals and marketeers were beginning to make claims on the refuse and rubbish that had fallen into the hands of the mere mortals — items thrown from Heaven while the Gods sliced each other's timelines and rumbled the skies with quantum pissing contests. Weapons, tools, texts, *people.* Many of the Spiral Politic's scum and lowlives guessed, quite correctly, that there would be a market for these goods in Peacetime.
Then, invitations began to appear in the hands of the right people. Crime lords, smugglers, mercenaries, politicians locking closets that were full to bursting with skeletons, clergymen with too much money and too little faith. People of power and influence and no regard for legality. People who were taking notice of the cries of peace from angels, from skulled theatre troupes, from the shadows that seeped into their bedrooms at night. People with *money*.

The invitations were royal purple, blue swirls and circlets shifting and condensing into whatever language, mathematical symbol, or shimmering waveforms were needed for the intended recipient.
The First Auction in Heaven, they read, *Where Bidding on the Homeworld's Misfortune Never Felt So Fortunate!*

Not a particularly fetching headline, most readers had to admit, but when the invitations dissolved and seeped into their skin, carrying coordinates directly to their most important lobes, positronic systems, or chlorophyllic processors, they realised catchy slogans had little influence on the rumbling hunger in their bank accounts.

The (Bidding) War

Cortalianesquertal vel-Lineacrux, disgraced Homeworlder, former High Councillor and Crime Lady supreme (and noted catsuit wearer) chewed on her cigarette as she watched her Servitors prepare the Auction. They were all as different and unique as snowflakes, despite sharing the same biodata. Giant scorpions with bulbous eye clusters and groups of bloated four-mouthed crabs set up the stands, dug the trenches, and built the fences. The writhing forms of tentacles and seven-fingered hands surveyed the area, testing the limits on the atmosphere bubble of Cortalian's timeship. One of them ventured too far and instantly blackened and sizzled under Kratoam's suns.
She looked at each of them, huffing the aquamarine smoke of her cigarette. She had found the base lifeform on a swamp somewhere on a forgotten planet. Massive and snake-like, with six stalked eyes and far too many teeth. She had started experimenting with a bull of the species for something to do on rainy evenings. And so, she'd folded the creature's biodata in on itself, pulled at evolutionary blocks and unused possibilities, forced forgotten forms into reality with the slice of a scalpel and the tightening of the silvery temporal threads.

Now she watched her little army setting up for the First Auction in Heaven, the security-forms close behind her, rustling inside their black armour. They were the best of the bunch, really. They maintained the near invulnerability of the original predator, their skin twisted and gnarled into a diamond shell, all inner organs now barbed and venomous, scraping on the inside of their new armour. And they'd kept the teeth.
Cortalian stamped out her finished cig and turned back to her timeship. It had taken the form of an aluminium tree, a strange sentiment of artificial nature on a planet like Kratoam. It hummed as she drew closer to it, and she patted its surface.

Keeping her bonded timeship was the only real kindness the Homeworld had offered her. She gave one last look to the forming Auction, and smiled. Distributing the weapons the War had scattered would range from being a stinging headache to an absolute disaster in the eyes of the Houses. In Cortalian's view, whether she made herself a nuisance or a threat worthy of the Homeworld Watch's hit list, she was going to have a damn good time irritating the dusty old bookkeepers that kicked her out.

As far as planets go**,** Kratoam was a fairly rubbish one. During the winter, it was dark and the air was frozen to the surface. In the summer, it was a baking desert.

The Auction was a self-contained atmosphere. A blue-green canopy gently floated above the throng, creating the bubble of space and time necessary to survive. It added a layer of azure ambiance to the chaos of grating sounds and spiced smells.

Nevertheless, Kratoam's twin suns were harsh, and Kifah was sweltering under his mask. The air was thick and musty, the blue-green casting everything in a sticky hue. The dried bone on his face was heavy and hot, and he was small in a crowd that swelled around him. He heard the imposing bulk of Gustav growl at someone that got too close, before feeling the reassuring claw on his shoulder.
"Too many people," Kifah admitted. "Too hot for this many people."

"Grmph," Gustav agreed, then hissed at a stilted posthuman who had dared glare at him with their beady white eyes. "Cortalian'sss doing it on purpossse."
"What do you mean?"

"The Homeworlderss hate nature. They prefer augmented climatess. Even an exsssile like herssself would have the technology to make thisss a practical oasssisss."
Pulling at his collar, Kifah looked around at the crowd. Amongst all the tendrils and mandibles

and buzzing hive forms, anything with perspiration glands was soaked. “So, why make us all miserable?”

“She’sss ssstill a Homeworlder,” Gustav spat. “Not being missserable is a privilege of the Housssesss. Disssgrasssed or not, she’sss ssstill rasssissst.”
Kifah frowned and looked up at Gustav worriedly. Martians, at least Gustav’s lot, came near sunstroke from the weather of a spring picnic. “How are you doing?”

“My armour isss helping,” Gustav wheezed, looking down at his Brother. The light above glinted across the crimson visor behind his mask’s sockets. “But, I would not be averssse to a glassss of water.”
They shouldered through, trying to find the main stage and hopefully a concessions stand. “Jussst watch,” Gustav added, “the loom-weft will have her own persssonal environment sssuit.”

Kifah had never been to any sort of auction, but he had created an image of what to expect. The War had had a bit of a history with dangerous and illegal sell-offs. A bit of weaponry there, an ancient relic here. So Kifah had imagined something small, an exclusive event of a select few Wartime powers and one or two lucky lesser species. He expected a subtle clamour of a few gods and monsters.
He was not expecting the First Auction in Heaven. It was more of a bazaar than a singular auction, a sprawling maze of stalls and bidding blocks. A menagerie of lesser species, a frothing mass of the human and the alien. There were stalls selling weapons to mob lords and war criminals, stands auctioning off pieces of culture or religions blasted into non-happening, tents showing disembodied limbs and chunks of Homeworlders under bright yellow signs of “GROW YOUR OWN LORD OF HISTORY.”

“Would a Homeworlder even make a good pet?” Kifah asked.
Gustav grunted. “I’d prefer one asss a rug.”

They worked deeper into the throng, as the people got taller and the sweat more rancid. Kifah hated to ask, but finally begged Gustav to put him on his shoulders. Gustav grumbled an agreement, and Kifah found himself hoisted up, clinging to Gustav’s helmet and wrapping his legs around the armoured neck.
“How’ssss the weather up there?” Gustav wheezed.

Across the sea of scales, feathers, towering necks, shells, and squelching tentacles, Kifah could see the main Auction stage. It was a platform of gold, hovering just high enough above the ground that no impatient buyer could touch any displayed merchandise without properly screaming their throat (or gaping, belching equivalent) hoarse. On the platform, safe behind a silver podium, was the perfect picture of Homeworld arrogance. Her skin was marble, lips bright purple and curled into the faintest sneer, her body vacuum-sealed into a dark blue jumpsuit. Her violet cape hung loose and open on her shoulders. Without a hint of irony, she held a gavel encrusted with glittering gems tightly in her hand. Kifah realised that she must be the famed Cortalian. She looked as frigid as one would expect a disgraced Homeworlder to be.
“Environment sssuit,” Gustav said, nodding at Cortalian’s outfit as it rippled liquid. “Called it.”

An item’s bidding was just finishing up. Kifah saw a trio of some kind of alien, all chained and on their knees. Their bodies were stitched from diamond, their veins pumping bright mercury. Their faces were featureless blank slates that reflected the light. Eight eyes moved on the edges of each of their clipped wings.
The winner was a bishop, fat and wrapped in silks. He bounced up the staircase to the stage, pulling the concubines leashed to his belt with him. He was babbling about his new possessions, but Kifah could only pick up the words “angels,” “his Holiness,” and “the fucking Protestants.”

He couldn’t help but notice one of the “angels” rolled all eight of its violet eyes.
Floating high above, almost touching the bottom of the Auction’s canopy, was a sphere of light. Raw spacetime trapped in a burning moment, a bubble of a single second. It levitated silently far above, like a spectator… or, Kifah realised, like an item on the queue.

“I sense only one from the Houses,” Father said. “Cortalian. As expected.”
“Good,” Mother responded, her beak clicking. “And this planet has never known the enemy’s touch.”

They were in the Shrine, a classic mausoleum of gray stone and moist skulls. Black blood stained the altar and the floor. A trio of loa circled idly overhead.
Auteur snorted. “This ball of shit hasn’t known a whole lot of anyone’s touch.”

Father snatched at the chain around Auteur’s throat to shut him up. “We will join Cousin Kifah and Brother Gustav in the Auction when the bidding for the *item* begins.”
The shadow pair had instructed Kifah and Gustav to go and survey the crowd while they completed the final few rituals to keep Auteur chained in the Shrine. Bringing Auteur, while in the interest of time, was not ideal. The man had a tendency towards murderous outbursts.

Auteur looked up at Father. His shadow closed over his lipless mouth to create a slitted smile.
“What did you tell him? About Intrepid?”

“That is no concern of yours,” Father snapped.
Mother gently touched her comrade’s arm. She imagined tearing it off. “The Little Brother knows we are not here for Intrepid. We have assured him that the captured members of our Family will be retrieved when the bonding ceremony is complete.”

“And he agreed?” Auteur prodded. “He’s not going to do anything rash?”
Father’s eye sockets burned. “He dare not.”

Auteur had no eyebrows, but his shadow folded over his face so he could raise one anyway. “You’ve never been in love, have you, *Père*?”
Father silently looked at Mother.

“*Amour,*” the Godfather sang, “is a promise to dare.” He giggled and tapped his heartsbeats against the nearest skull in the wall.

Souls of the Spirekeepers

“Sold!” Cortalian announced, slamming down her gavel, “to the Baron of Trilermeriaq!” She gestured dramatically at the winner, a posthuman (vibrant yellow coral and swaying sacks of brain forced into a three-piece suit) who excitedly squealed and mind-melded with his lover, the same shape in a satin evening gown.
Kifah pulled his mask off over his head and studied the prize. It was a stone tablet, the entire russet surface covered in white writing. All sorts of languages from all over the universe. The Ochenissi Tablet. Named for the planet, home to billions, turned into ancient fiction in the *Four Seconds of Ochenissi*.

“Could be worssse,” Gustav muttered, pointing to a stand close by, nearly whacking someone in the face. Kifah saw the collection of glass globes, each shining brightly, tiny lights and orbs

circling inside them like fireflies. Entire star systems being sold as paperweights. “You could be living in a fissshbowl.”
Kifah was about to argue which fate was less ideal, but then his eyes met Cortalian’s. Her face turned bright red and a vein pulsed in her neck, barely visible at the tip of her collar.

“She, uh, she sees us.”
“Of courssse ssshe ssseesss usss,” Gustav said. “I’m a ssseven foot tall Martian and you’re wearing a jaguar ssskull. We have asss much right to be here asss any.”

Cortalian’s enraged stare was causing a few others in the crowd to turn towards the pair. Kifah felt just a little bit hotter under his mask. “Still, she *is* Homeworld. Even if she’s not on good terms with the Ruling Houses, she could still really, *really* hate the Faction. Maybe she’d still want to enact some passionately inspired hate crime?”
“... You think ssshe’d be that petty?”

“She didn’t install any air conditioning. Or a decent drink stand. For the purposes of being petty.”
“... maybe we ssshould have come a bit more inconssspiciousssly,” Gustav decided.

“You have come as representatives of the Family,” Father said beside them, suddenly to Gustav’s left.
“And you shall appear and act as distinguished members of the Family,” Mother cooed, sliding in on the right.

“Get down,” Father ordered, roughly grabbing Kifah and pulling him off of Gustav’s shoulders. Father’s grip was a freezing vice, and Kifah gritted his teeth. “Appear presentable.”
“Straighten your tunic,” Mother instructed, gesturing to wrinkles down the front.

“Put your damn mask back on.”
“Don’t slouch.”

“I’m not slouching!” Kifah snapped.
“I was talking to Brother Gustav,” Mother said. Gustav grumbled in response and stood a little straighter.

“You’re still slouching.”
“I jussst look like thisss.”

“Quiet,” ordered Father, who met Cortalian’s fire with hollow sockets. His cloak shifted and he raised his long and stick-thin arm into the air. Dangling on a silver chain was an intricate weave of metal, a crescent moon of ancient markings and imprinted codes. At first, Kifah thought it was catching the sun’s light, but the glow became much stronger than a glint. It was a cold light in the stink and heat.
Kifah realised this was the first time he had ever actually seen the key to a timeship.

Catching sight of it, Cortalian paled a sickly white. She gripped a silver chain around her neck, as if to make sure it was still there. It was, but as she pulled it out of her collar to stare at the metallic crescent attached, her nostrils flared.
It was the same key, naturally. The one around her neck was the past. The one dangling from Father’s warped fingers was the future.

“How did we -”
“Ritual,” Father said, impatiently. “It was adrift in History.”

“She realises, of course,” Mother purred, “that one day she is going to lose it. Doesn’t really matter when or how, but she will.”
Gustav rumbled. “That ssship isss the only thing she’sss got left.”

“Exactly,” Father said. His voice was toxic. “This is our wager. For the item. She’ll let us be for the time being.”

The Auction continued.
A caged temporal predator, all oversized brain and tentacles, reciting the most famed soliloquy from *Hamlet.* A Homeworld hybrid, miniaturised in a glass bottle like a genie dressed as a comic book villain. A cache of red rockets programmed to warp reality and knock entire cities into a postmodern nightmare. A piece of timeship, melted into the gear shift of a passenger bus, blasted down into history after a collision with the City of the Saved.

The gavel slammed over and over as the bidders won. They offered money, jewels, planets, bits of timelines, entire storehouse of biodata.
All the while, Father held tightly to Cortalian's key, keeping it just barely in sight of the main stage.

After a fight over the best bid between a wiry technosapien and a gargling member of the Cephalopodic Coterie, Kifah saw the bubble of time far above slowly lower towards the stage. It was huge, and grew brighter as it neared, pale blue amongst the smog of ocean green. As it grew closer, Kifah realised he could see images trailing the surface of the light, almost like shapeless floaters in front of a person's vision. But these weren't shapeless, they were…
Faces.

Kifah felt sick. There were faces shifting and rolling in the light of the sphere, frozen in shock. Black blurs of shadow weapons lazed into view, caught mid-strike. Kifah's heart leapt and his stomach sank. Gustav's claw became a very heavy grip.
Hanging in a bubble of stopped time, somewhere amidst the paused moment of armoured Homeworld military and Family skulltroopers, was Intrepid.

"The Frozen Battle of Cratosi Fields," Cortalian announced. She gestured to it with a flourish that might have been dramatic if it had been less clinical. "A small militia of the Eighth Wave and an entire garrison of skulltroopers of the Faction Paradox. Trapped within a single second due to the clash of timeship weaponry and alt-time states. Abandoned by the Homeworld fleet and left drifting through the depths of the Spiral Politic." She eyed the crowd. She eyed Kifah. "Now at your whim and opportunity."
"That," whispered an Ice Heiress decked in sapphire, "would look phenomenal on the front lawn."

"What," Cortalian said, "am I bid?"
"The moon of Troth!" screamed a quilled centaur.

"Eighty-thousand nano-techs!" hollered a moustached starfish.
"Eeeeeeooocriq delleg trill milrib!" clicked a sharply dressed mantis.

Kifah bit his lip. Chewed his cheek. Looked at Intrepid's face.
"Fifty-million-"

He grabbed the key from Father's hand and bolted, pushing aside the hairy bidding hominid. He fought past the mass of limbs and colours until he stood directly beneath the stage. He held the key high towards Cortalian.
"The key to a Type-75 timeship," he announced. Cortalian's lips curved into a curt smile.

The sound that came from Father's chest had never been human. He was on Kifah in a moment, flitting through the crowd like a ghost, and wrapped Kifah in a haze of black.
"My compatriot," Father growled, "has acted prematurely. We respectfully retract the bid for this item."

Cortalian raised her eyebrow, but nodded. The crowd was staring at the display as Father dragged Kifah back to Mother and Gustav.
"I could *skin* you," Father spat, forcing Kifah into Gustav's arms.

“Brother Gustav, please escort our insubordinate to the Shrine. I see now that our trust in allowing him to take part was misplaced.”
Kifah looked at Father and Mother, eyes stinging. “Intrepid is Family. I wanted to save him.”

The Auction was resuming. The Ice Heiress was screaming away an asteroid belt.
“We shall rescue our own when we have the ability to do so,” Mother said. “Return to the Shrine.”

Kifah glared. His shadow flared up. “I’ve seen how you treat failures. The entire Spire has. Intrepid is a failure to you. You don't care what happens to him.”
“Silence!” Father ordered.

“Of course we care,” Mother said. “We’re Family.”
“The Diamond’s Brood for the Frozen Battle,” Cortalian announced, lifting her gavel. It twinkled in the shimmer of the battle overhead.

Gustav gripped Kifah obediently and began to haul him away, but couldn't help a poison look at Mother.
“Going once…”

“We,” the Martian hissed to the Spire’s matron, “are not a Family.”
“Going twice…”

The skull mask on Kifah’s face, more than ever, felt *wrong*.
“Going, going.” Cortalian paused, and slammed the gavel. “Gone.”

Just Another Homeworld Lost…

“Let me guess,” Godfather Auteur giggled. “You *dared.*”

Kifah threw his mask at him, and it clattered against the wall a head above him. The Godfather nodded, smugly satisfied, and went back to writing something in the dust.
They were in the Shrine. Kifah curled up into a corner. Gustav was standing between him and Auteur.

“Did you mean it?” Kifah asked, looking at the Martian.
“That we’re not Family?” Gustav asked. “Yesss. And no.”

Kifah looked at Gustav, hoping it was not obvious that he was fighting tears.
Gustav sighed and lifted the skull off his own head. His helmet, cracked and discoloured, looked like plastic in the Shrine’s dim light.

“I did not join the Facsshhun out of religiousss fervour. I did not join the Facsshhun out of loyalty or Familial love. I joined the Facsshhun becaussse I had nowhere to go.” He crossed his arms as best he could and leaned against the altar’s edge at the Shrine’s centre. “Marsss isss… unsscertain. Itsss exissstence isss in consstant fluxsss. Homeworld experimentsss, the Osssirian Court’sss touch. The enemy. My people exssissst one moment, and do not the nexsst.”
“Temporal Flux where the Houses take root…” Auteur sniggered. “The timelines boil where the Jackal pissed and the Falcon shat, and the enemy’s narrative overwrites yours…”

Gustav ignored him.
“I joined the Facsshhun becaussse I wanted my people’sss hissstory to *matter*. How elssse to ensssure a fantasssy could sssurvive real time than by the waysss of Paradockss?”

“And?”
“They don’t care. It’sss about lurking in ssshadow and plotting how to pisss off the Housssesss. I’m a commodity from a Marsss that isssn’t.” He chuckled. “I’m jussst part of the aesssthetic. So, yessss. I meant it when I sssaid the Facsshhun isss not my Family.”

The loa above moaned, almost sadly, and for a moment the Shrine lit with the colour of rust under a silver sun.
“However,” Gustav said, “that doesss not mean that *you* are not my brother.”

Kifah smiled. “I always wanted a big brother.”
“I am quite big,” Gustav confirmed.

“I was stupid,” Kifah said.
“No, you were heartbroken. You *are* heartbroken.”

“They knew I would do it. Be tempted to save him. Even after they told me not to. This was a test. To prove myself. They know how much I care about Intrepid. They know that he means more than the Faction does.”
Gustav shook his head. “No. They did thisss to be cruel.” He threw a snarl at Auteur. “*He* did thisss to be cruel. Whatever liesss they tell themselvesss of ritualsss, of ritesss, they did thisss out of cruelty. Ssssomething rotten insside wanted them to bring you, to sssee Intrepid. To ssstop you from sssaving him and the othersss. Disssguisssed as ressponsssability to the Family.”

Kifah chewed his lip.
“That’s what the Facsshhun doesss,” Gustav said. “Ssspend too much time in the shadowsss, and you become one. I’m loyal becaussse it keepsss me alive. I do what they sssay to sssurvive. But Little Brother, I *refussse* to become a ssshadow.”

Auteur, as if on cue, coughed.

Enter the Serpent

It was a sarcophagus. Large and glossed obsidian, encrusted with jewels. The face on the lid, once roughly humanoid, had been smashed.
No one else had bid on it. The crowd was silent.

The Bishop crossed himself, and held his concubines close.
The Angels’ whispers, a litany of broken song notes and hurt melodies, shifted and forced themselves into a single phrase.

Osirian.
Father gently placed the key into Cortalian’s outstretched hand.

“Thank you for your business,” Mother said.
Cortalian sent them both off with a very ancient and very rude epithet.

Kifah was thrown against the wall of the Shrine. Nothing cracked, but he tasted hot copper. Father loomed over him, tendrils of black reeling, orange coals in the black sockets.
“You little whelp!” screamed the wraith. “You insubordinate piece of filth!”

Gustav was held back by Mother. He strained against her shadowed tendrils. “Your Little Brother must be punished.”
Auteur picked at what remained of his nose.

“This was the opportunity to demonstrate yourself above your station,” Father snarled, circling Kifah. “To rise in the ranks of your Family, to show that you *care.*”
Kifah spat blood at Father. “I do *not* care!” Kifah roared. Father, unexpectedly, was stunned silent. “I joined for Intrepid,” Kifah continued. “I did not become a part of this game of cosmic dress-up for *family,* for *you,* or for the Grandfather. I joined for Intrepid.”

“The Family is *dying!*” Father roared. “The Empire is dead. The Faction is scattered to the winds, and we are now being picked off. One by one. By the Houses, by the enemy, and now by the—”
“Father,” Mother warned.

“Gustav’s right,” Kifah spat. “There’s nothing real inside of you, is there?”
Mother’s grip weakened on the Brother, and Father took a step back.

“Go on,” Auteur sneered.
“All you are is duty and loyalty to the idea of the Faction. It’s rotted you. You’re just empty shadows spouting nonsense and hypocrisy about Family while you’re just going to let Intrepid and the others—”

“They *failed*.” Father was a blur of rage, his body twisting, fading and darkening. Only the skull stayed stock-still. “The Fields of Cratosi was a disaster that echoed down the Spiral Politic. They deserved—” He stopped as if this was the first time he had actually heard himself.
“You were never going to save him, were you?”

Father was silent. Mother let Gustav go.
Kifah sighed, and gave an empty laugh. “You don’t even know. You both are just… shadows.”

Gustav shifted inside his armour, still casting an enraged look at the sarcophagus. “And thisss. You sssaid you were after a weapon. A weapon that you believed the Godfather’sss ssshadow could bind and control. You did not tell me it wasss *thisss.*” His voice hissed venom.
“...the priority was the weapon,” Mother said. “The weapon to save the Family.”

Gustav snarled. “An Osssirian weapon?”
“More than an Osirian weapon.” Mother glided to Father, and the two of them stood over the sarcophagus like parents. **“**A weaponised Osirian**.”**

“The Ship of a Billion Years,” Godfather Auteur announced. “The symbolic centre of the Osirian Court is powered by a sun that is, for all intents and purposes, sentient.” His teeth clicked. “Ra.”
“Ra was guarded by a select sect of Osirians,” Mother said.

“The Jackal and hisss brothersss,” Gustav spat. “Kingsss of the Dead, ssstationed around the sssun’s heart.”
“But when the Homeworld began to take interest in the Court, paranoia got the best of them,” Auteur continued. “They feared what a society known for blowing suns to pieces would do to, or want with, the flaming heart of their civilization. So, they created a failsafe.”

“Apep,” Father said quietly. “The serpent.”
“He was ascended,” Auteur said. “Or descended, depending on your point of view. The Osirians managed to inoculate him with alter-time states. Anti-matter, anti-time, the Schrödinger Virus. He became *unanchored.* And then, as these things tend to go, he went mad, was deemed far too dangerous to be let anywhere near Ra, and was locked away. Was moved from place to place, a forgotten relic on the Ship.”

Gustav bit the stale air. “The Jackal. And the Falcon. Their battle. It causssed a ssschisssm in the Court.”
Auteur’s glee whistled through a gap in his teeth. “More than a schism, my friend. The Ship of a

Billion Years was shattered. The Jackal had gone rabid, destroyed the Court's Throneworld. Even after they put him down, civil war and strife licked their culture like scalding flames. Entire worlds decimated, the very air turned to the sour and stink of rot. Suns switched off to become tombs."

Kifah stood straight and wiped the blood from his lips. "And Apep ended up at the Fields of Cratosi." It wasn't a question.
"Of course!" Auteur clapped. "When Court divided itself and slid into decay, Apep was sort of... misplaced."

"Intrepid was part of the mission to retrieve it." Mother was the only one speaking now. Father was sulking.
"You told everyone in the Spire it was a simple training exercise."

"Obviously, we lied."
Kifah's smile opened into an empty chuckle. "And, like they always do, the Houses turned up. Turned it into a battle. And we lost him."

Gustav hissed. He was still staring at the sarcophagus.
"Apep will defend the Family," Father whispered. "Even if we need to ride its back to the Homeworld itself and smash the Citadel."

Mother looked at Father and touched him gently. Picturing destruction on the Houses filled her up with love. Love, and nothing else.
Kifah nodded, huffed, and nodded again. "Alright. Well. Enjoy your snake. I'm going to save Intrepid." He turned to walk out of the Shrine, pointedly ignoring his discarded mask.

"You would not dare disobey us!" Father suddenly yelled. He fumed and sped towards the little Brother. "You will not *dare* walk away from—"
With a swish, the shadow of a ceremonial scimitar sang in the air and sliced Father's arm off.

He stumbled backwards. The wound was smoke and dust, biodata long crumbled to grey, but a tiny bit of blood splashed onto the floor.
Gustav raised his shadow weapon with a flourish. The details in the sword's carving, stories of conquest and tribulation in the ice kingdoms, could almost be seen in the black. "He sssaid he'sss going to sssave Intrepid." With a grunt, he followed his younger Brother.

"You both will be banned from the Spire!" Father screamed. His voice cracked like pottery. "We will hunt you! The Family of the Spire will hunt you both! You would not dare—"
They were gone.

"They dared," Mother said, needlessly. "Gustav did respond poorly to the Osirian, after all."
Auteur clapped his hands. "The lizard is going because his Little Brother gave him courage, not because of the coffin, you stupid woman!" He was laughing hysterically, his eyes popping out. "He loves his Little Brother. He's the only one who makes him feel real."

Father's arm writhed on the floor before fading away.
"Whatever's in that boy's biodata, it's powerful. No wonder the Houses wiped his planet out. That boy looked at Gustav, and his observation made his Mars, his history, for this moment, *real.*"

The Madness of Godfather Auteur

The Shrine hummed. The walls of skulls shifted and ruffled like feathers. The three loa brought

from the Spire circled above the sarcophagus, patches of absence and endless presence hovering like birds.

Father was muttering something, more barbed songs than words, his rasp colder and sharper. Mother inched towards him. She hated him now more than ever, loved him stronger than she could explain.
“Father, if Gustav and Kifah intend a rescue mission, we cannot do this here. We need to go.”

“We cannot risk the ritual in the Spire,” Father asserted. “We cannot endanger the Family.”
“We do not have to return to the Spire. We can take the Shrine elsewhere, another desolation, and attempt the bonding there. Kratoam is about to become a battlefield.” She gripped him, forced her eyeless stare into his. “We have to leave.”

Auteur, chained away from the sarcophagus, was staring out the door.
“Mother is proven right, Gustav and Kifah stamp off, Kifah acts like a lovestruck idiot…”

“Father,” Mother insisted, “stop the ceremony. For now. We can resume once we are safe.”
Father flinched. “We need the serpent.” He turned to Mother. “The Family needs to be safe.”

“The Homeworlders are nearly let out of the bag, the Battle’s commencement looms…”
The loa were frantic above them all, circling fast enough to be a blurred ring of time.

“Mother and Father start bickering like a divorce…”
Father snarled and turned to Auteur. “What are you—”

Auteur’s shadow squirmed like shiny black beetles. “And the loa attack.”
The largest of the circling loa swooped down and ripped through Father.

Mother glided to the other end of the Shrine, but the other two loa followed her. Their absence stretched to infinity, their presence filled to the brim with erased moments and repeating days. The fractals of history clawing and slashing, sharpened points of causality digging into flesh and withered shadow.
“Let me tell you two a story,” Auteur said, standing. His shadow was slipping from him, spreading along the floor of the Shrine. It lapped at Father’s blood and bubbled. “Once upon a time, there was a Homeworlder. A bit of a pioneer. He mapped the very first meridians of Time, you see. Sailed the first moments and tended to the very last days. Amidst the timid Watchmakers, he built astrolabes and *dared* into the frightening mists of History.”

The chains slipped off him like they were never locked. Father’s middle was gone, the loa tearing into him, the edges of his body already fraying and untangling into silver threads.
“This Homeworlder learned a very interesting truth,” Auteur continued. “He learned just how easy it was to abuse the so called ‘Observer Effect.’ To break the Protocols. He learned that you could make *anything* real, if you knew where to look.” He chuckled. “The Observer Effect. That a House member, no matter how small, no matter how young, even if they haven’t sprouted their twin heart, can look into the shifting blurred mess of History and make something turn *real.*”

Auteur’s smile, a frozen skeleton grin, grew larger, and too many teeth clacked together. “This Homeworlder is me, of course.”
Mother’s head rolled along the floor of the Shrine as Auteur’s shadow sucked her body into its pitch. Her sockets met Father’s, even as the loa peered through the inside of his skull.

“Mother,” Father said. His biodata was unpicked from him like from a spool into the humming sarcophagus. “I love you.”
“Shut up,” Mother said. Then she was gone.

Their phantom history was sucked into the faceless beast on the Osirian casket, and the lid slid off. The loa soared to the Shrine’s ceiling and circled the chasm in which Apep lay dead.
Auteur lifted his arms wide, the veins on his skull pumped black. “Life holds my skin like the cloak of a matador! She gloats with her wizened face of stone! Death comes when the Sun has set,

so I must devour the Sun!"

The loa coalesced, became as one, a single strand of raw and unkempt time, and dived into the heart of the sarcophagus.
"Grandfather keep me! Spirits protect me!" The howling of the skulls crescendoed. Several shattered and exploded in their combs in the wall. The sarcophagus growled. "Loa be praised! Death to the Homeworld! Strangle the confines of linearity! Woop-dee-do and Hullabaloo!"

Apep stirred. Its golden scales shimmered in the light of the loa, its skeletal spine shifted and popped. It looked straight at Auteur as his shadow, impossibly large, terrifyingly vast, wrapped around the shrivelled frame.
"My biodata," Auteur screamed, on a roll of megalomania, "bonded with Unanchored Time! He who is beyond time need not obey it! Forget Lord, I'm going to be God!"

Iridescent green eyes narrowed, then the snake guffawed and tore the shadow off of Auteur with a flick of its tail. The skinless muscle tore and burst, blood and meat splattering onto the floor.
Auteur blanked. "Uh."

The sound of loa song echoed through the Shrine as the shadow wrapped around Apep, molding over the rotten body.
"I… never saw this. I didn't write this."

Apep smiled. "Of course you didn't." Its voice was smooth, chilled, soft. "I did."
The serpent's jaws snapped shut over Auteur.

The Shrine, after a moment of silence, the song dying in the mouths of the remaining skulls, shattered.

"The Homeworld had particular inhabitants," Intrepid started, choosing words carefully. "They were more functions than they were people."

Kifah frowned. Why was he remembering this?
They were in their room in the Spire, wrapped close against the sharp bite of cold and spirits. The walls shuddered with icy breaths, in time with theirs.

"After the Anchoring," Intrepid said, "there needed to be… I guess you'd call them cartographers. Mappers. History had been laid, reality whipped into a pleasing shape, but now it was this huge expanse. Time had its Masters, but they had barely seen one corner of their domain."
Kifah shook his head, trying to focus. This wasn't a memory. It was like the dreams in the Spire, fleshy and raw. Kratoam seemed the memory, faint and indistinct, his mind trying to focus on the timbre of Intrepid's voice, the four-timed beat in his veins…

"The early Breeding Engines spat out prototypes and rejects. Paramutants and monsters. Some became useful, mercenaries and special ops teams, special executives, stuff like that. Others were undone. But eventually, the Engines started looming Homeworlders exactly how the Houses wanted."
"And then they made the Mappers?"

"And then they made the Mappers."
Focus. Kratoam. Not with Intrepid. Intrepid is trapped. Have to save Intrepid. Hold Gustav's hand. Claw. Whatever. Be grounded. Focus on Kratoam. Not in the Spire. This is the wrong part of the story.

"They used the Observer Effect to map the meridians of time. Whatever that means. Huddled in their offices, doped up on any hallucinogen, plugged into the Homeworld's computers. Making the first maps of the Spiral Politic."
Gustav's claw was warmer than he expected. Felt more like stone than plastic, thick and heavy.

The Martian didn't even notice.

"They all went insane, in the end," Intrepid said.
He's fading. What's going on? Is there something wrong with time?

"All of them took on names. You know, like how Homeworlders like to take titles and stuff. But they were really stupid names, all trying to work with a timekeeping theme. Astrolabe, Pendulum, stuff like that. And like most of Homeworld history, they were forgotten about."
"And the Godfather was one of them?"

"So the rumour goes," Intrepid said with a snort. "Personally, I think he started that rumour with his drinking buddies and just kept it going. A few of his cousins joined the Faction and lived in the Empire. They were all heavy drinkers. No, I think he told the story to be funny, to give his abilities some sort of gravitas… and then he got so swept up in it he turned out to be the only person who believed it."
The official word from the Empire was that Auteur had simply been one of the many droves driven from the Houses and to the Grandfather, albeit one of the more obviously deranged ones.

A *longer* story, scribbled in the Spire's lantern room, asserted that the Faction had found Auteur skinless and dying in a crumbling reality bubble. He was hiding from the Houses in a little slice of reality all his own, but had come across… *something*. Auteur claimed, through choking, blood-filled laughs, that Life itself had stolen his skin. Someone in the gathered crowd of skulls and velvet, an old House cousin, eventually recognised him and pleaded on his behalf for membership into the Family.
"He was always a storyteller. Saw the universe as one big maelstrom of story ideas."

"Get ready," Gustav hissed. His claw squeezed tighter. Painful, grounding. Intrepid was almost gone again. Kifah could feel it now, something behind him. Not physically, but looming on the horizon, a storm brewing in seconds to come. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.
Intrepid's sharp face, his gold flecked eyes, going, going—

"He thinks the valid universe is just a story he wrote. That's why the Faction locked him in the Spire, in the end. His beliefs went against the Grandfather's dogma. Auteur may not view History the way the Homeworld does, but he views himself as its master." Intrepid smiled again, and reached out to tap Kifah's nose. "Its author."
Gone.

"Something's coming," Kifah muttered to Gustav. "The past and present are merging."
The Martian grunted, and his shadow spiked.

The Drones of the Ice Heiress twitched and jolted around the Frozen Battle, carrying it obediently to their mistress' star speeder. A lesser Duke had finally managed to pry her from the Auction (amidst her cries of "But *I* want angels too!"), and she followed her servitors with a pout.
The Ice Drones were each single hulking colonies of insects, the hives sculpted into bodies of invulnerable organic glass. The queens of each hive, fat ticks that pulsed blue, twitched in the clear skulls of the Heiress' drones.

Formidable and uncanny perhaps, but, possibly still susceptible to the shadow weapons of Faction Paradox.
Gustav and Kifah planned to circle the Star Speeder and take the Heiress' drones from two sides. With sufficient slicing and dicing, enough of the Drones would be decimated for the pair to hijack the Battle *and* the Speeder.

The Ice Heiress screamed as they were attacked by the lumbering Martian and the young human. Swords made of their shadows sliced and diced. Trying to save herself, she pushed her Duke into the Martian's way, and made haste to the Star Speeder, only to trip on her hooped gown and smash her teeth on Kratoam's earth.

The Drones were falling, shadow weapons slicing through their histories and futures. Kifah heard several Martian curses, ancient and bloodsoaked, being hissed through Gustav's bared fangs. With every chop and with every swipe, the Drones were sent to the Jackal's Cauldron, an eternity of doom and torture.

A bit dramatic, but it was heartwarming to see how passionate Gustav was being.
The Martian bellowed when he turned and spotted the coming mob. Cortalian's servitors were coming. The commotion had been noticed by the Auction. The golden stage was flying higher now, to either keep Cortalian safe or to give her a bird's eye view of the expected massacre.

Kifah cursed, and looked around him. The Drones were falling, some had even fled, leaving the Duke and the Heiress wallowing in the dust. Cortalian's servitors would not be so flinching. They were coming closer and closer, talons and spikes glistening. The monsters would be upon the pair before they could make it to the Speeder's entry ramp.
Kifah looked at the Battle, the solid ball of blue. Intrepid was nowhere to be seen in the haze.

"Well, we dared," Kifah said. "Shall we continue?"
Gustav grunted at the approaching wall of jet armour, razor claws and teeth. He shrugged, and raised his scimitar. "It'sss been that sssort of day."

Cortalian, high above, allowed herself a smug and dry "mmph" of victory.
That's when Kifah saw the crack.

Floating in the wind like a line of smoke, a fracture in space. A tear in reality's fabric.
Kifah's skin bristled. "Gustav…"

Even over the din of the dying Drones and approaching Servitors, his Brother heard him. "Apep. He'sss not awake yet. But he doesssn't care. Space isss already reacting to the future."
The crack was leading a flock, each opening wider, eyelids of reality, vibrant shades of Deep Time pulsing like enraged irises. A tendril of tear, faster than Kifah could measure, raced towards the Battle.

The Ice Heiress, missing her two front teeth, saw the colours and smacked her Duke's shoulder.
"Wouldn't that just look lovely in the—"

The Battle buckled, and the same drifting crack carved itself onto the surface of the frozen time. With a silent roar, the blue sphere fractured and dissipated.
There was no comparable sound. Kifah was thrown back, and the planet shook. Cortalian's platform spun in the air as a shockwave raced in all directions, and she nosedived into the heart of her maddened bazaar. She didn't even scream.

With a roll of thunder and the rendering of the earth, the Battle of Cratosi Fields unfolded onto the First Auction in Heaven.

Heritage

Intrepid was alive. Unexpected. Not unwanted, but certainly unexpected. His skin felt too tight on

his bones. His shoulders felt too heavy.
He tried to remember…

There's nothing like watching time fold over top of you, he decided. Like being a piece on a game board, trapped as the sides rolled in, reality becoming a shell.
He was in a haze. Time was uncertain. He could see (not see, he could *feel*, he could *taste*) Apep, a discrepancy in House law. Raw, unanchored, wrong.

He was too calm. He knew that. Standing amidst flux, timelines merging, local History freezing before a reboot, he should have been terrified. He was very notably not.
He looked at the mixing froth like it was an ocean. He imagined colours swirling, giving depth and meaning to the abstract. The past, present, and future made into shades of rainbow oil under the surface of clear water.

He saw *Empire falling, shadowland pulled in, torn down, crumbling into the event horizon of a cruel, lipsticked sneer.*
He blinked and saw *the Homeworld's blazing orange sky, Faction boneships brittled and armed, descending even as the Edifice shadow covered the false Grandfather and the—*

He was seeing the recent past, and different versions of it. The different stories of the Faction's death, of his splinter's exile to the Spire.
Breathe. Focus. See the certainty in the mire. He paused, bit his lip. *Do not make the certainty. Just find it. A scrap of it.*

Behind him, he knew, could *feel,* was himself. Blond, blue-eyed. Behind himself was herself, lithe and long-haired. The faintest outlines of what was *ahead* ghosted in his peripheral vision.
"The Homeworlder in you, eh?"

Auteur's voice. Clear and cruel as ringing crystal. Intrepid didn't even turn to look. There probably wasn't anyone or anything to look at anyway.
"The time bubble is causing a bit of a reality conniption," the Homeworlder giggled. "Things will be set to rights soon." The voice came closer, nipping too close to Intrepid's ear. "Can you make heads or tails of it, boy?"

"I'm trying not to."
"Oh?" The voice sounded genuinely surprised.

"To make sense of it would be to establish order upon it. It would make me a Homeworlder."
"You *are* a Homeworlder, boy."

"Half."
The voice chuckled darkly. "How many faces have you had, *Cousin?"*

Intrepid grit his teeth, but refused to look into the absence behind him. "This is my third."
"All male?"

"Does it matter?"
"No. Just a curiosity. In my day, your age was *far* too young for the renewal. It was dangerous. Worse, it was impolite. Illegal."

"Well, isn't that what Faction Paradox is for? Breaking the rules?"
"Too true!" The voice was gleeful. It moved around Intrepid, cold in the unfeeling. Intrepid refused to look, but, in the very corner of his eye, he could see a *dark* against the colour of time. "Do you remember our little lessons? Mother and Father, excited to have two Homeworlders in their little Spire. All set and determined to lock you in with me and commune with the loa. Force their will into the story of the Spiral. They saw you as such a failure when your… other half proved stronger."

All pretence of French was gone. The joke, here, wasn't funny anymore. Auteur's true voice was

gargled shards of glass, more like the crunching of arthritic bones than voice.
Intrepid couldn't stop a little smile. "My proudest failure."

"Refusing your Homeworld heritage is your right, I grant that. But it is still there. No matter how hard you try to force it down." The dark, without a face, smiled. "How much does Kifah know of what it means to be a Homeworlder, exactly?"
"He knows enough."

"Does he? Does he understand what 'half-human' means? That you were a fleshy, pulsing runt in the loom's coils? That you aged in days rather than minutes? That your first renewal was because your body was fighting itself?"
"Stop."

The voice giggled again as the expanse above began to solidify into a sky. Stormy and boiled grey. Time would still be damaged, but Cratoasi (no, a different planet, hot and dry) was beginning to revert back.
Intrepid felt blood pooling under his armour. His legs were lost in pins and needles. The dark of Auteur was being blown away.

"Is he here? Kifah?"
"Of course he is, you idiot," the voice called as it drifted.

Intrepid, collapsing, laughed. "He dared."

The Reign of Apep

Kifah awoke in a dream.
No, not a dream, not like in the Spire. Those were cold, vicious, warm memories stripped naked and whipped into misery. This was…

Godfather Auteur. Maybe? He has skin, normal pink flesh, no sign of a hungry shadow lapping at his bones. Auteur from long before the Faction and the Spire, but his eyes are still glowing rings of orange. He's wizened, wrinkled and yellowed, balding save for two maddened patches of white on either side of his head. His beard is matted and greasy, his purple robes patched and frayed. He's bent over a book, scratching into margins, mumbling to himself.
Not a dream. Kifah could taste the thick incense, the dusty candles turning to bubbling wax, the rotting pages full of crystallised history. But he could also smell the blood and rank of the Auction, hear the sounds of Homeworld troops waking, screaming, roaring.

Feeling the fear. The uncertainty. Feeling the very biodata inside them boiling, twisting the familiar shape of the Homeworld into weapons.
Tendrils. Claws. Appendages miles long.

Auteur coughs and giggles, and looks directly into Kifah's eyes.
Time tracks. The disruptions in space, the shattering of the Battle. Kifah was flashing through time tracks. He felt the Faction in him writhe, heard the human in him scream.

"Gustav," he cried, silently, loudly, whispered, screamed.
Red dust. His fingers closed over cold, red dust. Rusted.

The Jackal, standing before him. No, not a Jackal… a shape, pitch, humanoid. Eyes a dying green.

Glaring at the sky.
The Falcon? No… a woman. Beautiful, deadly, aloft on wings of sun.

"Brother," the Falcon drones.
"I am not your brother," the Jackal scoffs with a voice of poisoned wine, raising a hand. Mars shakes and the rusted earth turns to blood.

"Focus," Kifah said to himself, "focus." *Focus on the Battle, focus on Kratoam, focus on—*
Unravelled in the breeding engines, screaming before living, programming of War and battle etched into the forming skin.

Auteur is cackling, enjoying the story he's writing. He doesn't see, doesn't see how the words are twisting and morphing into a single shape, a long train of narrative snaking through the texts and—
Snaking.

"Apep," Kifah coughed, trying to struggle to his feet. "Apep stole Auteur's story."
Helping his fellow Cousin to his feet, the scarlet armour of their chapterhouse clattering. Their House, just another past figure of power sliced to a servitor by Dvora. Hot, sick, stomach rolling. Where are they? What's happening? The biodata is screaming, needles in veins, sharp, burning—

Kifah ran into a Homeworlder. She was wounded, and had been before the Battle was frozen. Her stomach was open, blood almost black. Her blood was flecked with gold, eyes rimmed with light. She looked at Kifah. Terrified.
Old men and women, nightmares curled up behind the ancient skins of skullcapped curators, huddled in their jade cathedral. Watching the Spiral, seeing the angels singing of peace, seeing the celebrations and the words and exclamations of the War's end—

"I don't want to change," she said, *sobbed.* "Please don't let me change. I don't want to g—"
Razor mandibles began to force their way out of her throat, and her flesh was consumed in flame. Kifah stumbled away, refused to see the creature it would become, refused to listen to the armour crackle and pop into an exoskeleton, didn't want to hear the screaming—

The Jackal and the Falcon, tearing the sky in two, the menagerie of animals in the sky above shattering. The snake, slipping through—

Gentle touches during rituals, a velvet glove on a burnt hand. Hugs becoming longer, smiles becoming sweeter. Intrepid holding him as they looked at the red above them, felt the dark around them, heard the loa flapping and slithering and calling.
"Intrepid." Kifah steadied himself, swallowed hard. His stomach was sick, he was sweating, his hair matted. "Intrepid."

"This isn't a love story, boy," Auteur sneers. "Hell, this isn't even my story anymore."
Kifah began walking through the carnage. Explosions were happening in the distance, the goods of the Auction reacting to—

The serpent wrapping its coils around the splintering time, entrapping the flocks and swarms of loa, feeding…
Kifah found his Brother, clutching the ground, snarling and whining. Kifah's grip was soft but firm, forcing Gustav to look at him.

"Intrepid," Kifah said, resolute.
Gustav swallowed, nodded as best he could with his helmet. "Intrepid." He stood, large and strong, a taste of a planet's history, an entire world in one.

The Jackal spies the green creatures, armoured reptiles, all gnashing teeth and snapping claws, striking and tearing at his servants, his loyals…
"Brother," the Falcon calls again, drifting into the rent sky. "We must take our battle elsewhere."

The two brothers of Faction Paradox steadied themselves, and forced their way into the chaos of

the Auction in Heaven and the Battle of Cratoasi fields, Kifah keeping a firm grip of Gustav's arm. Over the din, floating on the winds of past and future, Intrepid's heartbeats led them to where he had crumpled.
"Characters, never staying to the fucking script," Auteur grumbles, fading into the past, never again to touch the future.

The Battle raged. The Homeworlders, lost without instruction or order, went haywire. Bodies of moulded flesh lashed at patrons, bisecting and decapitating. The Servitors went into overdrive, slashing, killing, fighting back. The weapons of the Auction, pieces of time welded into guns or bombs, fired or detonated or burned. "Orders!" one screamed as its body morphed into its own weapons, "I must have orders!"
Chaos.

It all paused, if only for a moment, as the shape rose into the air. Snake-like, massive, rolling and hissing against the twin suns. Two eyes, lidded green, looking down.
"*I,*" it bellowed. The surviving patrons screamed.

"*Am.*" The Homeworlders saw the Unanchored time, and their bodies begged for slaughter.
"*ALIVE.*"

It cackled, a monstrous shadow, loa squirming on the surface of its skin, their will of moments and years, past and present, holding back the Unanchoring.
"*Look upon me, ye mighty, and despair.*"

Silence.
Apep gleamed, its body rippling in the smoking air. It smiled. "*Welcome to your end.*"

The Homeworlders, as malfunctioning machines, roared as one and fired their weapons at the monster.
While the beams raced overhead, Gustav was shielding his little Brothers, scimitar raised. Kifah had found Intrepid, who was coughing and dazed, holding him in his arms. He watched Apep writhe in the sky, leaking blood and smoking shadow. Kratoam's sky was a spider's web of fractures and splinters. The cracks raced to the surface, and Kifah felt stuck between two walls of glass, watching the cracks race through objects, *people.*

The Ice Heiress, mouth bleeding, just regaining her balance, crumbled to dust...
Her Duke hit the ground as a fat foetus before popping out of existence entirely…

Explosions wracked the Auction as the bottle star systems went nova, as red rockets blasted patrons into surrealist caricatures…
"I think," Gustav said, "that the bonding csseremony went wrong." He paused as he readied his scimitar.

Kifah blinked at Gustav's readied weapon. "You're going to fight that thing?"
Gustav stared at him. "Are you insssane? Thisss isss the most real I've felt in agesss, I'm not going to get myssself killed. We need to get out of here."

The Homeworld soldiers had left the awakened skulltroopers alone. They marched towards Apep even as it made its way towards the surface, their staser canons and temporal rifles aimed high at the snake.
The smoke of the Auction was thick with burnt flesh and the ozone of History. Kifah thought of Home. The timeships warping overhead, the fire and chaos of a botched cover-up. Home had been on a time fissure. It had seeped into the land and into its people, changing their biology to something more distinctly House-like.

Kifah had survived the wipes and erasures, and even now was surviving the onslaught. He survived to meet the boy in the bone mask.
Intrepid opened his eyes, met Kifah's. The same smile. Warm, protective, safe. "Please don't tell me you released the entire battle just to get to me."

"To be fair," Kifah said, "I actually didn't."
"You!" a shrill voice shrieked. Kifah and Intrepid both jumped at the sight of Cortalian. She was bruised, bleeding, her arm twisted, her leg backwards. Her two timeship keys dangled from the chain against her throat. All the veins in her neck looked set to burst.

She looked exactly as angry as one would expect from a frigid, disgraced Homeworlder who had fallen out of the sky.
Intrepid raised his shadow weapon, a shotgun of laced pitch, and blew a sizeable chunk of her clean off. Her two keys hit the dirt without a scratch.

"I think she spoke at an Academy assembly once," Intrepid mused.
Kifah picked up the two keys, and saw one of the time cracks ahead of him. With a bit of a smug smile, he tossed one into the gap and put its older version around his neck.

"Wanna help me find a timeship?"
"You know I dropped out before they taught me how to *properly* fly one of these things, right?" Intrepid asked, before cutting Kifah's answer off with a kiss.

This time, there were no skull masks in the way.
Gustav ignored them, looking at Cortalian's corpse, and then at his shadow weapon. "In order to become thisss powerful, Apep would have appeasssed the loa with Auteur'sss biodata. They're not trapped, they're *feeding*." He then turned to the serpent, and grinned. "I have an idea."

And without another word, he plunged his shadow scimitar between Cortalian's still beating hearts.

The Closing of the First Auction in Heaven

Apep chuckled as the blasts from the House weapons ricocheted off its body. It was amused at these creatures, more than anything. With every three Wavers it smashed into the ground, three more continued firing. It cackled in the air, its new skin shifting and rolling around bones of stone, and blew pure night at the attackers. The weaponry the Sun Builders had brought had been primed for Osirian hide but not for one locked behind multitudes of loa.
Then, it paused, confused. There was a new smell. Rancid, sour. The stink of the Jackal and the Hawk turning the light in his smog of chaos. It looked down to find blasphemy in his gospel, this story he had taken from the author. A figure, bulky green, kneeling at the corpse of a Sun Builder. The Builder's body was unravelling, flesh shifting into dancing silver threads, History being plucked like—
Pain.
Apep screamed. Wrong, wrong, *wrong*. Pain was for *others*. Pain was for the *Sun,* pain was for those that danced in the warmth of the *Sun,* how dare this creature inflict pain on the master of this discord—

The loa were flaking off. With persistent pulling and fighting at Apep's blackened flesh. Reaching and clamouring for the biodata of the Sun Builder, exposing the raw beneath.
Apep snarked and worsened the storm of decaying reality with a swipe of its tail.
How dare he?

"It's not working," Intrepid said, gripping onto Kifah.

"Cortalian's biodata isn't enough. Auteur's is too rich. You need more history!"
"In the ssstoriesss," Gustav hissed, claws still clasped in ritual, "Ra and Apep battled in the underworld. Apep had to lie beyond the horizon, trapped under the final light of dawn. He could encssircle the entire world, choke Marsss with hisss coilsss, waiting for Ra to dip into his clutchesss."

Cortalian was gone, her biodata a silver shimmer in the air beckoning the loa closer and closer. They pulled from Apep, hungry, salivating, needing to taste a fresh drop of the Homeworld.
"When I wasss faithful," Gustav continued, "I dreamed of leading my brood behind Ra'sss trail, into the underworld beyond the horizon. I dreamed of facssing Apep, fighting him, loosssening his coilsss upon my home."

Something else was happening, knitting from the air. The smell of massed lizard hides, of fires of ritual and ascendance. The tastes of copper and the bite of snow and ice. Kifah could still feel time tracks mixing, tangling, and in his periphery, saw the plains of the Red Planet.
"I no longer believe in Ra," Gustav said, voice louder, impassioned, his strained whisper terrifying against the winds. "But I believe in my *home.*"

He was no longer Gustav. In this moment, he was the history of Mars itself.
The biodata flashed, blinding, and the loa, hundreds strong, tore themselves from Apep's body.

The serpent couldn't even scream. Its mouth frothed, and its eyes widened in shock as its body was left naked and dripping in the forming maelstrom of its own design.
"Without the loa," Gustav announced, "all it isss is a ssshred of the Unanchoring. A fluxss. Only the gaze of a Homeworlder could make him cssertain."

Kifah, with a cheeky grin, covered his and Intrepid's eyes.
Apep hung in the air, motionless, while the sky of Kratoam continued to split. The loa were fading, slipping through the cracks, leaving the Osirian to the mercy of physics.

"We mussst leave," Gustav said, yanking his shadow from the ground.
Kifah helped Intrepid to his feet, keeping his eyes closed, and tossed Gustav the silver key. "Cortalian's timeship."

Gustav nodded, and the trio raced towards the edge of the Auction even as the Fourth Wavers charged towards Apep, who was slowly drifting downwards.
"You know, I wasn't being coy," Intrepid coughed. "I'm actually pretty sure I can't fly a timeship."

"We'll improvise," Kifah assured him.
"It'sss pretty much what we've been doing all day," Gustav wheezed.

The shrieks shattered the air into shards. Quantum foam and boiling time rotted the land, poisoning the flesh and bone of the planet. Smells decayed, putrid and slimed, noises held as freezing echoes.
Apep lashed, roared, spasmed. *Things* on the other side, with too many wings and too many teeth, laughed. With a final flourish in the air, Apep fell to the planet's surface. The sky dripped like tar.

The aluminium tree at the Auction's end began to moan and groan. The Auction's canopy folded in and vanished.
The planet started falling, the fractures in History finally caving, a chasm opening…

The timeship, carrying the Faction of the Spire, blinked out of sight…
The colours, the sights, the people, it all flashed for a moment, one final spark of reality…

Once.
Twice.

Apep vanished into the planet's skin. The chasm closed.
Kratoam was going…

Going…
Gone.

Jukebox

Aditya Bidikar

Dear sister:

There is pain. I can feel every nerve of my being scream away from itself. The final drop of blood ritually spilt escapes my body and time means nothing. I cross aeons, dragged through space and time and the cold beyond them. The last thing I carry with me as I travel to this place is the pull of your hands on mine, begging me not to go.
As I coalesce, the planet greets me drab, with a soiled air. I land, aware of my body once again, and of its painful nausea. Sense trickles in; uncomfortable, I begin to feel the buzz of signals, pressing in, itching to reach behind my eyes. I cannot make meaning of them, which I suppose a mercy given what I have been told.

The air is of active creation, as though this place isn't done occurring. I am thinking most – if you'll cast your mind back – of ritual visits to the temple to the Spider. In the village where I lived, we would take half the day off, and the whole village, as one, unspoken, would gather at the foot of the mountain, the elders with their gibberish, and the children excited, important. At the temple atop, the priest would narrate the epyllion to the gathering, and, surrounded by the whispers of my unruly cohort, I would close my eyes and fall into the story he told, of past and the rolling present and the long future, of the weave till the end of the universe. A thing still being built.
As I move, go from dazed to sober, my vision clears. There is odd architecture. Most of the buildings I can see are squat, but seem built out of broken remnants of edifices that once scraped the sky, jagged rooflets left as sole proof of their lost provenance. The red sky, as I look up, makes me squint, is eerily silent and void of creatures of flight. On instinct, I loathe this place.

I am expected. As I catch my breath, an old, frail man walks up to me. With haunted eyes, he stares into the distance and waits for me to capture my balance. When I am recovered, he gestures at my satchel, ultimately pulling it off my shoulder himself, and he begins walking. I follow.
As we get to the centre of the city, where a spire overlooks its liegemen, announcing its obvious importance, the signals are stronger. The city itself as we approach is quieter, a monochrome presence. I see citizens walking along dusty streets, purposeless, mostly oblivious to each other. I see some conversations, but the participants pause, stare into the distance too often. They seem to be play-acting their lives.

It is hot, most are dressed in paridhanas around their waists and nothing else. I nod to a few and get no response. My companion is no better. Each time I speak, he turns to me as if dutybound, but reverts and continues walking. Whether he is mute or under instructions not to speak I have yet to find out. He is strong for his frame, and I entertain myself as we walk, watching sinews in his back shift as they contract and relax to his steps and to the strain of my bag on his shoulder.
This is my first mission outside our wretched old home, and I'm curious, eager not to run to quick judgment of what I see. Humanity in its universal glory is opening up to me, even if its first respiration is in the form of this malformed remote colony. There have been and

will be vast trillions of human lives, from the first germination on ancient Earth to the final human molecule in the last posthuman before its progeny becomes something else altogether. And I can't wait to see them. It will take some getting used to, and I know I have you and Johnny for that.

We enter the spire, and the signals cease; there is an eerie calm. If you remember, as part of training us for travel, Johnny and I were flung into vacuum, to maintain a simple self-protective spell. As the spell weakened, the air would begin to escape, and my head would ache, as if my bones, my skull itself, were straining to burst out of my skin. The silence here feels similar, as if about to kill me.
The antechamber of the spire has a moulded ceiling and pillars with decorated capitals. An architecture I'm unfamiliar with, it nevertheless makes me feel for a moment I'm part of something grand. I stop to look, and my companion grunts. In consideration of his age and his needless insistence on carrying my luggage, I follow him up two flights of stairs to my quarters – a set of tall, officious rooms with minimal furniture and no windows. Instead, a door leads to a viewing balcony from which I can see most of the knobbly, sprawling city. In the far distance, to my left and to my right, I can see identical towers – relay elements for the signals. The primary transmitter, I presume, is within the spire I am stood in.

There is a darwan at the main door of my quarters, dressed in a formal-looking tunic and a roughshod turban coiled on his head. He carries a comically tall spear, and I suspect my host has placed him here to intimidate me.
"When do I meet him?" I ask the old man as he deposits my bag next to my bed. He leaves without answering me.

I walk up to the darwan and urge him: "Perhaps you could inform me." He doesn't reply, continuing to look forward. I can't help but be amused.
"Have I the liberty to stray a little?" I consider that my host wouldn't take kindly to my mounting an investigation before I had even met him. It is incumbent on him, then, to be a better host.

The darwan continues not to answer, I assume his silence to be assent, and I take a walk. I am presuming the architecture of the spire has been dictated by my host, perhaps according to the tastes of his original lifetime. Nothing feels ornate, but the architecture feels obdurate, attempting to be very firmly itself.
I'm not better aware of the customs of conduct of my host's time, as perhaps Godfather should have educated me, but none of his staff seem willing to speak with me. There are a few attendants in proximity, and a lady clad in loose plaited trousers and a blouse proffers me a tray full of fruits with her eyes downcast, but each time I strike up a conversation with one of them, they look afar, and walk away. I am unsure if this is my host's preference or a symptom of the planet before him.

I have now returned to my rooms, and I am eating an apple that reminds me of home as I write this letter.
I have no conjecture why my host would not meet me directly as I came, but Godfather Maiglan mentioned he might do this to show power. Thus far I am befuddled, but not anxious. I presume to meet Satyavan in the coming days. An unmet guest in one's home is something one stays aware of, whatever one's attitude on the matter.

I leave it to your discretion if you would show Godfather this letter or if you would narrate it to him. If he reads this, he is bound to chide me for hewing so close to our old manner of speaking, but it helps me clarify my thoughts if I do not keep trying to expand my temporal register, and it eases my nausea while away, so Godfather Maiglan can, in

Johnny's parlance, suck it.
Regardless, in your reply, I look forward to hearing from you and Johnny considerably more than I await further instructions from Godfather.

Yours, with adoration,
Mirze

***

Dear sister:

I must confess I did not destroy your reply immediately as instructed. Instead, I reread it today, trying to commit it to memory, before concluding that keeping it accessible any further is a risk I cannot take. My apologies to you and to Godfather.

Today has been trying. After three days of being kept in wait, I am taken to my host. I believe his motivation in making me wait has been to frustrate me, and to convey to our Faction that they are not as entirely his masters as they assumed, but we knew that, and I am well-habituated of waiting.
I spend these three days anticipating your letter back, wondering when you will receive mine and if we might lose all touch with each other, if the magic Godfather has let me borrow does not align our times correctly. Other than that, I wander the spire. I am not allowed outside, but within, there seem to be no constraint on my movements, even though a majority of the chambers are kept under lock.

There are five storeys accessible by the opulent staircase. The one on top contains machines set in the walls – I presume to fulfil the spire's original function, to control the signals. When first Godfather explained the remote colony, and our Faction's role in its creation, I must confess I was horrified. But looking at this innocuous apparatus sending signals to further our cause, it does ease my strain. The two storeys under it seem given over to Satyavan's living quarters. He has a surprising number of attendants, and try as I might, none of them will talk to me about his mission, which leads me to suspect Satyavan has commandeered them into being his personal servants. The storey below mine has rather a large number of corridors leading to locked rooms. I believe here dwells the machine with which my mission is concerned.
This morning, I awake to the darwan standing by my bed. He informs me that Satyavan will see me for breakfast.

I am brought into Satyavan's morning room, on the storey just above mine, facing the circular concourse of the city. The breakfast table is long and well-appointed. Satyavan clearly wants to impress me, and it is laid with more food than ten people could eat in a day, and I am beginning to doubt that Satyavan's attendants are allowed to partake in the same victuals as him. I recognise some of the raw fruits and vegetables laid in strange, ornate patterns, but the rest is of an unfamiliar bouquet of spices that nonetheless arouses my appetite.
My host is standing next to his chair, dressed in some manner of clothing from his home. Apart from his breeches, which seem woven from plain white cloth and draped on him in layers, each item of his clothing is lined with metallic plating and jewellery where he found it appropriate.

He is bald, hatchet-faced, with an eyebrow ready to be cocked at a moment's notice, which he does as I reach the table. When I bow to him, he bows grudgingly back and takes his seat.
"I quite enjoyed the apples you had your attendants gave me on my first day here," I say, noting the delay in our meeting. "They reminded me of the apples my uncle grew back home."

He reaches for an apple on the table and bites into it. "These are Kashmiri," he replies. "From a little before my time. Back…home." He chews noisily. "I've been trying to grow them here from seeds, but this planet isn't used to growing its own food."
"They are delicious, to be sure. I am assuming the ones I ate on my planet were descendants of these in some fashion."

"Depends," he says, as he throws the half-chewed fruit to an attendant who attempts to catch it and misses, "on when the Faction got to your planet."
I ignore the obvious gibe. "I must ask if growing food from your home planet is the best use of your time and resources. But perhaps that is better discussed in due course?"

At my reply, Satyavan cocks his eyebrow once more, and turns away from me to serve himself. There is awkward quiet as I follow suit.
"I have met some of your residents," I tell him. "They seem reluctant to speak with me."

"It can't be helped," he replies. "I had to make sure that the remote colony remained… pure. It would be detrimental if they listened to just anyone, wouldn't you agree? We have a little security arrangement for the planet, but we don't always know what enemy agents might come up with."
"But this is a secret project. Only the Faction is meant to know about it."

"That's for you to think and me to ridicule."
We are quiet for a moment. "So…" I prompt.

"So I feed them control signals. The city surrounding the main transmitter is the baseline. The machine helps me reach everywhere else on the planet, using that as a benchmark. Helps me keep them straight. But that means that every stimulus is countered by a signal. You speaking to them is just such a stimulus.
"Is a conversation with me the sort of stimulus you need to keep them protected from?"

"I prefer to keep the environment hermetic. You're here for…how long? Is there any point in their being exposed to you?"
"Is that why you haven't been responding to our messages?"

Satyavan points a spoon at me as he thoughtfully chews on the morsel in his mouth. From the rippling of the muscles in his cheeks and the determination with which his jaws champ, I assume it is meat.
"My mission," he says, "is to change minds. And that is what I have been doing. The Faction, I find, doesn't understand the delicacy of the matter. I put it to you, Mirze, that the idea is not as simple as it sounds."

He swallows, then runs his tongue over his teeth to inspect them for straggling titbits, continues, "Anybody who attempts to change minds on a planetary scale is an invader. It might not be a pleasant thought, but it's true. Given that I knew this, and that I accepted the mission regardless, it was up to me to determine what I would *say* to change these minds. To lie would be propaganda. And to use propaganda for an invasion would be an act of war. And as you know, Mirze, we're all about peace at the moment."

He smiles to himself as he says that. “So I decided, it would be tactical to live up to my name – Satyavan, the truth-teller. I decided to make things true.”

I nod, delaying my inevitable reply: “I must confess, Satyavan, that I am lost.”
“That’s all right,” Satyavan says. “There is no need for us to rush your understanding. You’re welcome to watch me work. You must provide your masters an accurate picture of what you witness. In the meantime, I’d be delighted to hear more about you. However did you get involved with our little Faction?”

The question is expected, but I am unsure of my answer. A dangerous man as he may be, and a potential enemy to our Faction, he is still my host, and I am a harmless emissary.
“I wasn’t recruited,” I say, “so much as adopted. I was found and brought to Godfather Maiglan after a skirmish in the long war. It wasn’t too far in the past, by my reckoning. Months, maybe a…”

I can’t go on. My breath quickens, boltlings of white swim in my eyes, and the nausea of non-linear time rises in my throat. I turn away and swallow urgently, gripping the chair to abate the endless fall my insides feel every time this happens. “Excuse me,” I say, and rub my temples, trying to calm myself down. I think of you, and of Johnny, and how present I feel when we’re together.
When I open my eyes, I find Satyavan staring at me, intent.

“I apologise,” I say. “I am unused to seeing time the way the Faction does. It is a physical discomfort. My planet…our view of time was different.” I find that my hands are still shaking a little. Satyavan, his eyes kinder, offers me a cup of water, I drink gratefully.
“After the battle,” I continue, “my planet didn’t exist any longer. An arbitrary misalignment. Needless, nonsensical – typical of the adversaries, as I learnt later. I was rescued, though, by a colleague.”

Satyavan stands up. “Someone must have been paying attention to you. Is it just you now? From your planet?”
“No, I have a sister. Uh…when I joined the Faction, I discovered another survivor. She has been part of the Faction much longer, and helps me in my disorientation. To be honest, I am not yet comfortable being away from her for long. Our Godfather thought it was time.”

Satyavan smiles, but it is not nice to see. “I’m sure he did,” he says.
To be honest, I want to leave right then. Not just the room, but the whole place, the planet. I am ashamed of my lapse, and I don’t want a stranger to witness me vulnerable. More than anything, then, I want to curl up in your lap and weep myself to sleep, so I don’t have to think on this fragmented life any longer. But that is not an option, and his brief silence is a mercy.

He approaches, and lays a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Please come with me.”
We go to a balcony, and he points to the city, and by implication, the planet beyond it. “I understand, you know. This – what I’m doing here – is about belonging. Nobody should have no home. I…I too come from a culture that’s been destroyed. That wasn’t *allowed* to exist.”

He grips my shoulder tight, his thumb digging into my subclavia. “It’s not…*fair* that I didn’t have a home. At least you have your sister. I…”
His voice shakes and trails into naught. He gazes at his world for a moment, then speaks, “Ananta.”

The elderly man who received me on this planet appears. Satyavan nods to him, and Ananta takes me by the elbow.
“But,” I protest, “you were telling me…”

Satyavan walks away, into the room, past the breakfast table, into the corridor, out of my sight.

It is evening once more as I write this, and I have been alone the day’s remainder. Truly am I lucky, sister, that I have you. I imagine a state as sole survivor of our world, without you, and it is an incomprehensible condition. Out of a naive lust and a faithful love, young Johnny Tsun bid me to live, but if you did not exist, I could only have a distraught hate for all remaining humankind. Resentment of a nature and extent I can scarce conceive as I think of you. Much as I love Johnny, I doubt this is something he could understand.

And it is therefore that I must also thank your infinite patience for this lost boy, who finds solace in you and who is jealous of this very letter, which, with a few drops of blood and muttered sounds will disappear from his hand and will join you in the next instant of its existence, just as he wishes he could.

With love,
Mirze

***

Dear sister:

Apologies for not writing back sooner. A week since my last letter, and three days since I received your reply. It has been difficult to put this into words as, for a first, I have useful information for the Faction.

I am also troubled by your news of Johnny. Or rather – it hurt that he would not tell us about his mission, but after months of not hearing from him, it seems callous of Godfather to refuse to give you news. If you will remember, Vendela, his mission to our world was just such a secret, and it was not until the end that Johnny realised what was happening. The fact that we lived was an accident, a happy one. The next accident might not be such. I know I must put away thoughts like these, for, alone as I am here, they would burrow and fester if I allow them. But I feel I should register my unhappiness on the matter, to you and to Godfather if he reads this.
Finally, it has been rare that Satyavan leaves me alone. It is not for me to say whether he has grown fond of my company, but he wishes me by his side quite a measure.

The morning since my last letter to you, he sends word for me to join him in his working spaces, as he calls them. Ananta arrives at my quarters bearing a memorandum with the invitation. I follow him down the stairs to the storey below mine, after which he leaves me to navigate the corridors.
A majority of the rooms are still locked, but I go deeper, led by blue light, to a room with a bank of screens covering a wall. As I enter, I find the screens cover every wall of the room, leaving space only for the door through which I came, and another on the opposite

wall, leading to a similar room, full of screens.

I walk through these rooms, which show a distinct scene on every screen. I see people living lives – sometimes jubilant, sometimes morose, mostly just lives – farming, playing, swimming, working, loving, fighting, bartering, eating, relaxing. It takes me a good while to realise that, like Satyavan and I, these people are largely of brown skin, and they seem at first to be the same kind of people as one another. But then I begin to see differences in bearing, in their pehnawa, in architecture, in their vehicles. These are all people of Satyavan's planet, and they are not who they were supposed to be.
In the third or fourth room in, I find Satyavan sitting with his eyes closed, meditating. He is in front of a screen that to me looks much like any of the others.

"I come from a ghost culture," he begins, without opening his eyes. "From an era when my country had been invaded so many times it had forgotten what it used to be."
"You mentioned something of the sort yesterday," I reply.

He breathes deep, and opens his eyes. "I apologise. I communed with my gods for guidance earlier in the day. I needed some contemplation afterwards."
He gets up and gestures me. I follow as he walks down the bank of screens.

"I met my father once," he continues. "After I'd joined the Faction, I mean. He didn't remember me, of course, but I was surprised that *I* barely remembered him. He told me how we – our race – could have ruled the world once, and how outsiders took that away from us. Time and time again. Our country had a glorious past - many, in fact. Thousands. I have counted. Each of them ended in invasion.
"It was a feeling I'd had all my life, set down in words. I couldn't tell if it was something my father had always told me, that he remembered because some aspect of him knew who I was. Or maybe I had never really been that close to my father, and my forgetting was a pretence I'd created in the absence of intimacy."

We walk into another room, with as many screens. "There were and could have been so many golden ages," he continues, "that were cut down before they could be, by people who were jealous. Who could not stand a society of resplendence from people they wished to dismiss as savages. We were changed – left enervated and ashamed of ourselves, aping all our invaders in our clothing and our language and in our very being, alien to what had made us ourselves. We were Hind in name alone.
"My father asked me to imagine each of these cultures." He stops at a screen and points to it. "Consider the Maurya, converted to Buddhism by Ashoka before dying out, what they might have been by our time."

He turns and singles out other screens in succession. "The Rajputs plundered by Ghazni. What Ghor Muhammad did at Tarain. The Talikota jihad when the sultanates of the south collaborated with the King's own generals to bring down Vijaynagar."

As we enter another room: "And the greatest insult – a hundred small beautiful kingdoms bastardised, stepmothered and finally subsumed by the British before being spat out as India when they were no longer of use. Each of these could have become something in the hundreds of years that it spent being overwritten by the jealous invader. Imagine who could have been standing there instead of a penniless, dying man and his shameless son who had voluntarily forgone his history."
He turns to me, almost tender. "When I was sent here by the Faction, I realised I didn't have to imagine."

I struggle with his implication for a moment.

“You’re trying to reconstruct…” I pause as I try to grasp it. “You’re trying to reconstruct the past?”

“Far from it, Mirze. What use would that be? The past already proved not strong enough. What I’m trying to create is what that past *would* have been were it given the chance to become a present. If it had been allowed the weight and momentum of history.”
I glance at the screens, turning to see more and more. There are hundreds. “A present?” I ask him. “*Which* present?”

“The correct one. A present I would have been born into. That I would’ve belonged to. The world that I was *supposed* to inherit.
“I’ve always felt alone. Like I saw something nobody else did. Not this broken thing, but something full, something with community, a node in a matrix.

“When I joined the Faction, I assumed that my past had been solid, that it was I who was broken. But meeting my father…I realised what had been done to me. That I was born in the wrong world.
“And in the Faction…the abortion I had to call my present wasn’t immutable. I could fix it.”

“And this planet…” I began.
“…was perfect. When the Faction sent me here with their machine, I began a new life. I began communing with my gods. They made realise that whoever had taken the truth from me – whether an enemy, a…bureaucratic error like your mishap or maybe the Faction itself – I could fix everything here.”

“Because of the signals,” I say.
“A remote world of genetic humans constantly primed to receive signals. That’s why the Faction wanted me to test their machine here. Check whether the methodology holds.”

“So it works. Why wouldn’t you report that back?”
He gives me a look of utter disdain at the question. “You sound like the ones before you. You can do better.”

Still taking in his words, I look around at the screens, feeling a little dizzy. “How many of these are there?” I ask him. “Are they all showing things happening out there? This moment?”
“Thousands, child. I looked deep into history, and knew I needed to try everything I could before I knew where I belonged. It had to *feel* right. I use this place to gaze at the fruits of my labour.”

He gestures wildly at the screens. “Look how happy they all are! Soon I’ll find the perfect one – my civilisation.”
I feel a wave of nausea. There’s a wrongness to it all at which my stomach lurches.

“Where’s the machine, Satyavan?”
He puts his hands on my shoulders. “Relax, Mirze. It’s here, in a room you couldn’t enter if you tried, and I implore you not to. You should try harder to understand what is happening here. Look around, let it sink in.”

He pats my shoulder amicably and leaves.
For the next hour, or perhaps two, I wander through his rooms. Thousands. Thousands of screens, each trained on a different place on his planet. Monitoring people play-acting at being something wholly unlike themselves – or perhaps blank canvasses painted over with someone else’s desires. I walk through his strange menagerie till, in a daze, I can’t take in

anything more, and I return to my rooms. It takes me days since to bring myself to write to you. I still struggle to digest all of his agenda.

Vendela, my beloved, I've had time to ponder my life since I've been in the Faction. It is often a difficult life, trauma waiting under the surface to emerge when I least want it, but it has been a bigger life too.
Johnny, a man from Satyavan's own world, has asked us both this at different times – how we reconcile our lives before the Faction with the awesome truth of the spiral politic. You, of course, are an affirmed atheist. You believed in neither the Spider nor the Weave for a long time before you left. You were lucky enough to be born in an era, much after my time, when the orthodoxy was on the wane and radical ideas of cosmology on the rise. You believed, as did a lot of people around you, that humanity had come to our world from afar, star travellers, and had proliferated and forgotten their true history. The Faction, when it found you, had a pupil already sceptical, ready to be given better truths.

I lucked out. Blundering through my life, I barely understood our cosmology, instead living it. Falling into the future a day at a time, plummeting towards the Spider waiting at the end of the universe to consume our spirits and turn us into an aspect of itself. When our world was destroyed, I was saved because I fell recklessly for a man who showed me love, who then caught me as the world collapsed and brought me to you.

Satyavan was not so lucky. I believe whatever happened that lost him his past broke him. Who would join the Faction that is not already or is soon to be broken.

There is a bitterness filling me, Vendela. I await instructions. Help me.

Mirze

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Dear sister:

Once more, I owe you an apology for my delayed reply. I am on my bed, surrounded by the beautiful letters you have written me in the absence of my response. Letters of heartache, letters of pain, of battle, and I have, like an unimaginable fool, not been able to put pen on paper.
First, forgive me for not thinking of your state in the absence of both Johnny and me. The Faction, for all its parental appointment, does not possess a lover's care. And with Johnny disappeared on his secret mission, my silence must have caused you much distress. I know in your letters you make a brave face, but I can see the hurt behind the words, and I have no excuse but my apology.

And yet, I remember your bravery when I first told you about our world's death, about its erasure from history. I wept as I told you, and you were so strong. You took my hand, led me to a lake, and over the evening, we named our loved ones and tossed stones in the water in their honour, their memories rippling through the universe a last time. I knew you did not believe in the ritual, but I felt then that you did it as much for yourself as for

me. I knew that our connection was not to be solely that of two survivors. I have always found it funny that you thanked Johnny for saving me when I have been, for certain, more trouble than I am worth.
It is difficult. I have not kept well in the last few weeks. It is not a physical unease – that is easily resolved. Being here is troubling in the soul.

I wish I could leave and return, but Godfather was clever – he has taught me enough magic to transport these letters to you, and to protect myself from immediate dangers, but I cannot travel back myself. More than once, I sit and attempt to cobble together an utterance from what I have learnt, but I remember the incomparable pain of my teleportation here, and I imagine myself rent into particles and never assembling again. It makes me shudder. And mistrust Godfather a little. For I have questions.
On to news from me: There are two million people on this little planet, sister, a remote colony the Faction has nurtured over a period. They are nonetheless susceptible to a peculiarly quick evolution. And given what I know the Faction has been attempting with them, I understand why they have kept the existence of the colony a secret at large.

Satyavan does not let me out of the spire, a prisoner in all but name, and yet he actively encourages that I sit in his rooms with the screens and watch his doing. He believes in his cause so fervently that he cannot fancy any disapproval on my part.
He has not played with the city wherein he lives – instead, he has rendered them all his servants. The rest of the planet he has engineered to his pleasure. In his words: “It’s stunning how easy planning can be on a planetary scale if everyone listens to you.”

The entire globe is sectioned to match the civilisations he wishes to contrive. Mountains, forest, farmland, water – wherever each civilisation flourished, that is where it finds itself. Separated by crude fencing and walls, they are discouraged in their minds from crossing boundaries. Over days, I begin to identify what each civilisation descends from. Satyavan is eager to convey his knowledge of Earth history, although there is always a veneer of his desires and rages that contorts his telling.
I watch the experiment unfold. Satyavan’s signals force life to occur faster than it naturally does. At first, it makes the effects of his actions more comprehensible. It is easier to watch philosophies come to dominate. We find Kings and Queens, we find panchayats and councils and nomadic tribes with chieftains. We find people making their slow ways in history. None that Satyavan finds community in, but he seems happy to wait.

There are silken robes, there are hemp skirts and turbans, there are horse-drawn carriages and bullock carts. I see stone temples and forts, and clay hovels and thatched roofs and swords and axes and shovels and ploughs. It is soon too much. The alienness of these things is painful. As they blur together, so does my vision, and I faint.
I come to on my bed, with Satyavan sitting by my side, a look of concern.

“I apologise…” I begin, and he cuts me off: “It’s alright. It must all be so strange to you. I had forgotten how alien the universe is if you’ve never been away from your planet. It’s been a long time since that was true for me.”
That evening, he takes me past the first storey to the ground floor of the spire. I look to the exit, and it is locked, with two formidable darwans standing in front of it for my benefit.

There is a large door along the way, and we both pause. Satyavan looks at it with something resembling love, and I feel a similar emotion prickling inside my skin. I wish to enter.
I touch the door and Satyavan pulls me back in jealous fury. “No!” he says. “You do *not* get to go there.”

He drags me away, further down the corridor, and the feeling fades. He lets me go, almost embarrassed. “That…” he says, “that’s the one room you’re not allowed to enter.”
Sister, I am certain that is where the machine resides.

He leads me to a room in which I see one screen, and a machine attached.
“I got this cooked up for you,” Satyavan says.

“What is it?”
“I’ve been keeping records of my experiment. What works, what doesn’t work. Where dead-ends gather. What’s promising. The thousands of civilisations running at the moment are highly selected from where I started. This, Mirze, is where you can access *any* of them. To your pleasure.”

“Why?” I ask.
His face darkens. “I feel for you, Mirze. You are not like the others. I think there’s a chance that you will come around on this, and you’ll help me.”

“Others?”
“Of course. You don’t believe you’re the first agent the Faction has sent to check on me, do you?”

“And what happened to them?” I ask, sinking into myself.
Satyavan leans over close, uncomfortably so. He gives me an awful smile. “That’s for the Faction and me to know, Mirze. It won’t be a pleasant discovery for you, I feel.”

That said, he goes about his work again, and I am left alone.
I wish to run to my rooms and write you with all the questions swimming in my head then, but instead, numbed, I play one of Satyavan’s recordings.

It is a city the residents call Indraprastha. The women are dressed in cholis and the men wear dhotis. There are squat buildings of mud and bricks to live in, but the special ones – the temples and the courts – have stone columns and domed ceilings.
There is a Queen, a beauty with poise, but not much mercy. I watch as she sentences an unwed mother-to-be to the gallows, upon which the woman’s lover attempts to attack the queen and is cut down mid-tussle. The woman weeps and curses the Queen. Days later, after the execution, the Queen, with her lover, is assassinated by means of poison on her minister’s behest.

In another, there is a city wreathed in snow. A young boy plays out in the street for too long, so his father whips him as his mother watches, flinching at every sting. There is a beautiful city centre here, with massive glass windows, where people gather each evening. There is poetry and storytelling in the cold winter nights. One of the storytellers, I note, resembles the Queen’s minister from the previous recording.
On a hot summer afternoon, outside a southern village, a farmer and his wife talk over lunch under the shade of a peepul tree.

In a small town on the banks of a tumultuous river, a political speaker berates the existent monarchy as her compatriots cheer in defiance of the surrounding military.
I am watching old worlds, civilisations that Satyavan has judged insufficient. There were lives lived, erased at a whim. But I can’t stop. If he summarily dismissed them, then I must bear witness.

That night, I try to pass the machine room once more as I return to my quarters, but there are guards who direct me to another route. It has been decreed that I am not allowed near the machine room.

For the next few days, I continue to watch those I begin to see as my people, subject to a cruel overlord. Satyavan leaves me alone, a mercy. I try twice more to gain access to the machine room, or, at least, to feel the strange whisper of emotion inside me again, to feel wanted. But the guards are implacable, unresponding. So every day, I retreat to the little room Satyavan's given me, and I keep watch over my flock.

And then I see things as they should not occur. There is one, and then more. Satyavan has made a huge mistake. I realise I must speak with him.
Heavy feet, I walk up to the screen rooms, and find Satyavan, bare-chested, nursing a wound in his torso. Ananta, the old man, holds his cloak.

I lean to look, and Satyavan notices me. He grabs the cloak and clumsily throws it upon himself. I notice there are other notches in his skin, wounds, some old, others fresh.
"Have you been outside?" I ask him.

He shakes his head. "Why do you ask?"
"I have noticed something," I reply.

Back in the room with the recordings, I show him.
It is one recording where I see a transformation – the moment Satyavan decrees the simulation ended and begins another one. Every person stops as the signals change, and then unfreezes, beginning another life. Except one, who stands, confused, then walks away.

"What about it?" Satyavan says.
I start a different recording. "This is what became of this place."

And in the middle of a carnival, there stands the same man, in the same clothing, looking horrified, while everyone around him has changed.
"So," I tell Satyavan, "I started keeping note of such happenings."

I show him another – a soldier in a small skirmish. Again, the simulation ends, everyone begins a new life, except for him. Somewhere else, the same soldier walks into the middle of a town square, and in front of horrified civilian eyes, kills himself.
I show him the litany. Anachronisms, persons wandering through different sections – humans being humans. Satyavan's carefully drawn lines do not hold. Neither does his grip on people's behaviours.

I watch him as he realises it. "How many did you see?"
I pick up my notebook and begin leafing through it, and he realises how bad it is. "How … how did I not see this? Why wasn't I told?"

I stand up to confront him. "Do you realise what this means?"
I can see Satyavan furious, teeth clenched. "I *created* this place, Mirze. Of *course* I understand what this means."

His shoulders sag. "You should go get some rest," he says. "I need to meditate on this." He disappears down the stairs to commune with his gods. He is rattled, to be sure.
I retire to my quarters to contemplate horrible questions of my own. Not regarding Satyavan and his planet, but about Godfather Maiglan, and our Faction. Why was I not informed of my predecessors? Who were they, and why were they acceptable casualties? Is that so with me? What does the Faction want of us, if they have such little regard for us? I realise I say this with an utter lack of power, but I am assured you will tend to my outrage. Why has Godfather hidden so much from me? I must know.

Yours, attempting courage,

Mirze

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My beloved Vendela:

This letter comes to you on the heels of the last one, and this is deliberate. If you wish to show this to Godfather for reasons you think legitimate, I will find no offence, but it is meant for your eyes alone.
I know you have said that you have narrated my letters to Godfather in preference to his reading them directly, but I do not wish to put you in a difficult place by forcing you to expunge material in your narration.

I must confess that I find myself in the precarious position of not knowing where my trust should lie. I write in defiance of this feeling, for if I can't trust you, the question is pointless.
Satyavan, madman though he may be, draws my compassion for his suffering. And his disdain for the Faction, apparent from my arrival here, has me questioning the Faction's motives for us. There are thoughts in my mind I am unable to turn away from, thoughts you might deduce about the Faction and our world, and why Johnny's mission has to be secret, and why I wasn't told about the emissaries the Faction has evidently lost to Satyavan's planet, and why it is allowed to persist still.

I find myself missing Johnny, as much from your letters as from my memories. Have I ever told you where we met first? A simple lad as I was, my parents had understood me useless for most ventures, and wished merely to ensure my future was not in some stoop, begging for scraps. They had subscribed me to trainee priesthood, to perhaps be a fabulist - helping to add tales to the great saga of the Weave – or failing that, to be a waterbearer at a temple, so that leastways I could die with a full belly.
I was at the gates of Iskaron when I met Johnny. Dashing, wearing an outfit styled after Earth spy attire, with a jaunty hat set upon his brow, he was unbearably sexy, despite the strident manner in which he addressed the city guards. They found his clothes strange and I offered him a spare robe from my fortnighter. He remained in a strop till we reached the priory, and we had to part ways. It was there that I asked him to forget about the guards and to tell me if he'd like me to sneak out in the night to meet him. He broke out in a monumental grin, and that was when he had me fully.

I find myself closing my eyes and thinking of that day as the last untrammelled good day I had. I have needed it.
After the conversation I recreated in my previous letter, Satyavan and I are on terse yet speaking terms. He and I have been watching his screens together for more anomalies. We find skirmishes breaking out between various sections. When I point out that too many peoples on his planet have armies, he takes that to be a delight. He finds his theory of superior cultures borne out. I point to him that these are invasions, but he feels these to be of the appropriate kind. It is the problem with the kind of jingoism he has encouraged that its sufferers want to see it afflicted on others.

There were instances I did not detail in my previous letter that were not relevant to Godfather's purposes which nevertheless darkened my spirit.
As his cultures started developing draconian punishments, we watched when, in a section descended from the Cholas, a man had his arms cut off for insulting the sarpanch of his town. I closed my eyes as the axe plunged down. When I opened them, Satyavan looked, if anything, pleased.

There were sections that, unexpectedly for me, found themselves concentrating on learning and on peace, and progress to permissive, even indulgent mindsets. At the time, I felt these might be home for Satyavan soon. The first time I pointed this out to him, he noticed an allowance of public nudity, and promptly withdrew to his machine room and began running a different extrapolation there. I felt my heart drop – this was a people that were alive, were real, and he decided, on his personal discomfiture, that they did not deserve to exist. I pointed out the lack of objectivity, and he gave me a familiar look of disdain. I desisted from pointing out any other candidates I felt might be appropriate.
The violence we see now is unsurprising given its master's proclivities. Nonetheless, I broach the idea that this violence might find its cause in people's memories being torn from them and rebuilt. Perhaps, I conjecture, one cannot replace millions of memories with perfect substitutes.

"I *told* you," Satyavan says, "that's not what I'm doing. I'm just giving them a better truth to live with. I'm not actually *changing* them."
"I know what the machine does, Satyavan. You realise they have no choice in the matter. You *make* them believe. They were people, like you and I, and you have shorn them of that dignity."

"They didn't used to be *anything*," he insists. "These were *half*-people, vessels for new memories to be poured into. That's what they were built for. Lest you forget, this was what your Faction sent me here to do in the first place."
As the days pass, the boundaries break almost entirely. There are wars, kingdoms break out of their confines and conquer their neighbours. At times, these are the merest deviations from their own culture, but they feel no compunctions in committing warlike atrocities on their near-twins.

I am horrified by the number of bodies, but Satyavan is not, and my sympathy for him is bled out on the fields of his planet. At this juncture, I loathe him, and only bear the sight of him because I need him to stop.
"How would you find your belonging here?" I ask him. He is puzzled. "You wish to find the pure culture you would belong to, but where this ends up will be the same circumstance you were born in. A culture forcibly mixed with others outside its control."

This reaches him, for I have spoken to his logic, in which his mythical culture would be the fair opposite of this dark humanity. I have let dew fall on his weave, it might melt the web. I am scared.
Satyavan retires to his machine room for a full week. This is a week in which I could write to you, but instead, I witness the wars and the bloodshed. Initially, there is fascination, but it is soon overtaken by numbness. I barely notice any change Satyavan makes in his extrapolations, if he even tries. I begin to live in the screen rooms, going upstairs only to get my food, since I am unable to talk to any of Satyavan's retinue to ask them to bring it to where I am.

The deaths start to grate. I want to impart meaning to them, so I keep pulling in close, looking into their eyes to see if, in these moments of killing in pretence, they find a glimmer of their real selves and understand the horror of what they partake in, but I am

consistently disappointed. I have a tally of the deaths in the first three days, then I see my fond farmer, older now, a footsoldier in someone's army, plunge an indignant sword into the neck of a shepherd, and I stop counting.
A week on, I have had enough. I try to charge into the machine room where Satyavan has locked himself. There is, once again, a feeling. But different this time. Worried, urgent. Nothing of the love and kindness I felt when I first came here.

The guards close their spears in my path. I am unarmed, but still, I duck and reach the door. As one of the guards grabs my collar and pulls me back, I shout at Satyavan inside, begging him to come out.
I do not know what I have planned. Will I run past him and lock myself in the machine room? Try and take care of this myself? Or will I ask him to stop? I know not what I have the courage for.

The guard drags me away and I shout myself hoarse. As he is about to drop my in the next corridor, though, a voice calls out: "Stop!"
Satyavan emerges from the machine room, wearing a simple robe, followed by Ananta. He looks gaunt, sick. He glowers at me as he passes my side. "Walk with me," he says.

I follow him and he walks through all the rooms. His robe sways as he does so, sticks to body, coming away with red beginning to permeate through the fabric. He has been bleeding. Making sacrifices.
He looks at each screen, at first inscrutable, but when he returns to where I am, I can see his face bathed in sweat and tears.

He grasps both my arms. "I have failed, Mirze. They tell me I have failed."
He leaves before I can speak a word.

It is now night, and I lie in my bed, weeping as I finish the second of these letters. I think of the poor millions, in so similar a state to us ungrounded. I think of Satyavan, his own history lost to him, a monster attempting to reconstruct and magnify it. I think of Johnny, I know not where and when.
I feel so lost. I don't know where in the universe I stand. How far from our world or from where you are. Even this moment itself, I don't know if it occurs concurrently with you, or if you lie in the past or the future. I have no power to move from here without intervention, and I dare not hope for it, even though I would like you to petition Godfather on my behalf to allow me to return.

Every moment dies, sister. Every moment is a drop in the vast ocean of the spiral politic, large swathes of it more dead than others. I am ungrounded, unmoored in time. Occasionally I am unsure if you, Johnny and Godfather Maiglan exist. I've kept your lovely letters to remind myself you are real, but I must destroy them soon. Then you will disappear, and I will be unsure again.
When he returns, sister, remind Johnny of me. Love him, show him how much he means. There are so many billions of strangers in the universe. And billions more in the past and yet more in the future. I feel so alone, sister – the two of you my only home.

Mirze

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Dear sister:

I must apologise for the tone of my last letter. I admit I was losing my spirit at the time, and allowed myself to be swayed from my task. Matters have become clearer since.

Please let Godfather know that I take his admonitions to heart. It is impertinent and futile of me to question his motives when my image of the cosmic tableau is fractured. I also understand that until we know precisely what we must do to rectify the course of the experiment or stop it, it is unwise for the Faction to send people to my aid. If the machine is as effective as was our need – and it seems that is the case – we cannot appreciate what would happen if Satyavan turned it on us.
For some days after our strange altercation, Satyavan remains disappeared. He grapples with the task before him. On the screens, the state of affairs is never improved, only worse. More and more die in these toy wars, and every time he tunes something, it resets and begins again, with more violence.

There is a desperation on the faces I see. Why I continue to watch…I have no excuse, my beloved, except that I am their sole witness. Someone, I feel, should know that they lived. Someone with no disdain for them.
There is a miasma forming over the planet. Shadows, emerging as if to devour the dead, or to mourn them with me. I might be imagining it, hallucinating a darkness. They seem real to none but me, but the people of this planet notice few things now.

As the experiment continues, Satyavan's people seem more mindless. For the ones raging, there is only frenzy, and for the rest, a peace. This is what I expected – that their enthusiasm for their being would deteriorate. Quiet, staring into nothing.
Then one day, there it is – silence, eerie, all over the planet.

It is horrifying, sister. I watch as they stop eating, stop living their lives. They are living ghosts of a people that were once something. As if, instructed to obey, obey, obey, their minds had a black thought and decided to give this to him in the most literal way. They decided to stop being people.
Satyavan emerges from his machine room, presumably aware of what has happened. Emaciated, barely fed, there are cuts bleeding through his shirt that he tries to hide under a cape.

He walks down the bank of screens, and I watch him realise what he has done to them. His eyes flit from screen to screen, attempting to comprehend his actions.
"I need to stop this, don't I?" he asks.

I place my hand on his shoulder in encouragement, though it revolts me to do so. He is crestfallen.
"What do you think the Faction will do to me?"

"I will ask them to be kind."
He nods, tears glistening in his eyes. "Then you will go back. To your…sister," he says, clearly a little jealous.

"And Johnny," I say, unguarded.
He looks up sharply. "Johnny? Who is that?"

"He is our companion. Johnny Tsun. He was the one who rescued me when my planet was

eliminated."
"Do you love him?" he asks, worry coursing through his face.

"I love them both," I answer.
He leans in and strokes my cheek. "You are an unfortunate man, Mirze, but you have been lucky. Get some sleep. We'll wrap up tomorrow."

I feel sad, sister. But hopeful. Soon the Faction will bring me back and I will not have to think about this terrible place. I will be able to see you, and the universe will be alight once more.

Mirze

***

Dear sister:

Everything has gone wrong. I wish you to be comfortable as you read this, for it will be distressing. You are in danger, as am I.
First, Johnny…Johnny is no longer. I have seen it with my own eyes, and you must believe me.

The next day, I stand in front of the machine room, awaiting Satyavan, eager to help him end the matter. When he appears, instead he leads me to the room with the recordings. He plays me a specific one, from long before I arrived.
There is a skirmish in one of the northern kingdoms. A band of desert rebels attacking the castle of the Maharana. Among them, I see a familiar face. Johnny.

I look askance at Satyavan. Stoic, he continues watching, unwilling to meet my eyes.
It is Johnny, but the light behind his eyes is of someone else. He has been fed to the machine. And I watch as a curved sword arcs down and plunges into his neck. An ignominious death. His compatriots storm the castle, and the recording ends.

Satyavan speaks, still not looking in my direction, "This was months before you came. They sent him to fiddle with my work. I found out, and I…put him out to farm. That's him, isn't it?"
"What about the purity of your experiment…?"

"I'm sorry. I misspoke. I was just annoyed."
I begin to cry.

"You understand what this means, though, Mirze. The Faction is playing you. They never planned to stop me. They want to see this played out. You're a casualty. A sacrifice."
"Why would I believe you, Satyavan?"

He asks me to help him dismantle the experiment. He has already cut the signals down – he believes shutting them completely could be dangerous for the catatonic population. He wants to get them slowly thinking for themselves. Or so says he.
"Perhaps the Faction would be better suited for the task," I say. "They might have played us, but they can still make a choice."

He refuses to brook that, getting agitated. “You don’t understand what they’re doing, Mirze.”
“Neither do you! Do you really think this is within your capabilities? You had a whole planet on hand last time.”

“I know what I can do. We can take the people who aren’t affected too badly and put them to work.”
“And how would you find them?”

“There is a way. I can give control over to the gods. They can talk through the machine and work on a bigger scale than any of us could.”
“What are you talking about? I thought your gods were in your head.”

“Did you think me mad?”
I refuse to answer that. “They’re gods, Mirze,” he continues. “They can transition between planes. They’re manifest. Can you not see the shadows all over?”

“Those are…your gods?”
“*Yes!* That is how they keep an eye on the populace. My last sacrifices gave them that power. I just need to hand over it all to them, and they’ll fix everything.”

I cannot take any more. I punch him.
Since then, I have been imprisoned in my quarters. I have been surprised at my fortitude with Johnny’s death. I realise now it was merely a delay in trauma.

Sister, this is enough.
I do not know what to do next, a neophyte with barely any power. I wish to kill Satyavan, but I presume that is not what the Faction wants. In fact, I am unclear on what the Faction wishes to do with me, if I am to be left to die here. It would be a fate I would welcome, but for my desire to see you again.

I am weak, sister. It has been months since I have seen you, and our Johnny is dead. I have been sharing Satyavan’s madness for so long that I can see his gods, unsure if they are real or I remember them because of his telling.
It is difficult making sense of this bizarre universe I find myself in, and I am afraid to contemplate if I have filled the void with monsters. I need to see you, and I need your help.

Save me. Tell me what to do.

With love and desperation,

Mirze

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Dear sister:

This is my final letter to you. I shall either see you soon, Vendela, or I shall be dead.
Thank you for replying quickly. I should not have lost my spirit easily. I am happy to hear that you took the decision not to show my last letter to Godfather. It was something I

could not bring myself to request, but that I wished nonetheless.

Thank you as well for the strange attachments. Once again, I could not ask directly. What I must do now does not make me happy, but I lack any choice.
At least it is all over.

This morning, breakfast is brought by Ananta and the girl who fed me apples when I came here. I ask lightly if Satyavan will not join us. They shake their heads and wait for me to eat.
I try and prod Ananta to tell me why Satyavan is not here, but I suspect he knows not himself. The girl and Ananta leave without another word, and I follow them.

Outside the machine room, the guards stare into space, either unaware of me, or waiting for me to do something. I choose between the weapons you have sent me.
Once they are dealt with, I put my fingers to the door, and it swings open, almost on its own.

“Come in,” says Satyavan, and I enter.
Satyavan stands facing an altar as tall as his waist. As I join him, I see the altar has an elaborate pattern of grooves, run with blood, much of it dried and crusted.

Behind the altar is the machine. That, though, feels very much the wrong word.
There are mechanical parts, but they are few and far between, suspended in what could be construed as space. Arranged in their midst are possible thought patterns, ranging from the childlike to those with the maturity of centuries. Slowly the machine cycles through them. There are lives within, regrets and hopes, those of Satyavan’s people, of the designers of the machine, of the Faction members who stole it, and those that were fed to it later, masticated and partly digested. There are solid components, but they appear and vanish with such vigour that I cannot tell what they look like – some of them seeming to be multiple things at once.

The machine sits in a corner, but encompasses the entire chamber and spaces beyond it. Watching it, my mind hurts. It watches me in turn.
I cannot hold my temporal vertigo. I lean against a wall and vomit out the previous night’s dinner.

Taking some time to compose myself, I look at Satyavan. He stares at the machine, entranced.
With a deep breath, I look at the machine again, and see there are presences within that do not belong. Shadows snake their ways amidst parts of the machine, lithely navigating the dimensions of the machine such that, at a glance, they might be essential components.

Satyavan’s gods, starker than they were outside, unfolding into identities that slip as I hold my gaze. It is these that Satyavan fawns over.
He is half-naked, new cuts on his torso from which he has fed the altar fresh, glinting in the strange light of the machine. There are other, older cuts, speaking of a relationship well-tended. A thought enters my mind.

“It doesn’t work,” he says.
“What doesn’t work?” I ask.

Without turning, he continues, “You’re asking yourself why I use my own blood, when I have so many people to take it from. It doesn’t work. Has to be mine.”
I watch the shadowy tendrils nestled in the machine reach out and caress the altar, slowly push further and writhe seductively towards Satyavan.

“What are you doing?” I ask him.
He steps away from the altar, with a pleased grin, genuinely made happy. “I know what to do, Mirze. I’ve been talking to the gods all of last night. I don’t think I’ve *ever* felt such an intimacy with them before. They reached into my mind and found my solution.”

He rests a patronising hand on my shoulder. “It was, as you said, wrong of me to expect that I could pick up a bunch of susceptible idiots and turn them into my people. The existent population is irrelevant. It is the *place* I built that matters. This planet. Where my gods have lived, waiting for me. I don’t need to create the people I belong to, I just need to invite them in.”
“Invite…where from?”

“All the worlds I told you about, all the possible presents that could have been if only history had gone differently. *They all exist*, Mirze. Just not here.
“Even as your planet was written out, these histories of my planet were written out, if by more prosaic means. I merely have to access these alternate times, and bring their people here.”

“And how would you do this?”
Satyavan’s fingers dig into my shoulders. “You’re new to the Faction, Mirze. You don’t realise *how much* one can bend reality if one has the power. And I do. I just need to let the gods at the machine, and I can do anything I like. I only have to decide *what*.

“I really wish you could see it my way, Mirze. And this time, I’m not hurting anyone.”
As he walks back to the altar, the shadowy tendrils of his gods reach out from inexplicable stations, slowly push further and writhe seductively towards him. He holds out both arms, and they coil around him like vines.

I finger the barely existent knife concealed in my palm, retrieved from your last letter, and I step up behind him.
The vines grip him, and the machine begins to hum. Images appear in the air, Satyavan smiles wildly – his people. The ones he has been looking for.

“They are not gods, Satyavan,” I tell him. “They just want you think that.”
“No, Mirze,” he says, deliriously happy. “Look. They’ve brought me my people.”

“No, Satyavan, you just gave them access to the machine. And that’s what they’ve wanted all along, don’t you see? That’s the lure.”
I place the knife at his ribs. He can only feel my fingers poking at his back, but I close my eyes and the knife is there, waiting to penetrate skin.

“You have no home, Satyavan. And you never will. Everything else is a lie so that you would do what someone else wants.” I take a breath and push the knife between his ribs.
The image falters. The shadows rise, disturbed, but also drawn by the sacrifice. They flail in the hot air, tentacles trying to grip at smells. The knife melts into Satyavan’s skin, and the wound closes over, leaving a dark bruise in its wake. His body slackens in my arms, now mere weight without an agent.

I place him gently on the floor. I am loathe to turn back to the machine, but I know I must.
As I contemplate the next part of my task, Ananta enters the room, bewildered. He looks from me to his fallen master, but the signals in his head refuse to tell him what to do.

“Look after him,” I tell Ananta, and breathing deep, I face the machine.
And I see you in it, and I see my parents, and I see my little village, nestled under a

mountain, teal sky edging to purple as the evening grew over it. No wonder Satyavan was bound by its spell.

As I write this to you, I sit outside the room, and the shadows call at me, seductive, convincing. I feel for them, lost spirits posing as gods for a desperate man. I know not what precisely their tragedy was, what inconvenient history they present, but if it is the Faction's doing, it is but one of many things they must answer for.
If I feel desolate now, I also feel courage. I worry for you – both your lovers dead or dying. But you have strength beyond mine, Vendela. I trust that you will move on from us, from your dashing Johnny, your foolish Mirze, and from your poisonous Faction.

I will take care of things here.

Seeking your forgiveness,
Mirze

A Farewell to Arms

Nate Bumber

Shockley's Den of Almost Limitless Iniquity was a truly sordid institution. After the original perished in the cataclysm at the start of the War, countless copycats sprung up throughout the cosmos, wherever the black market saw an opportunity. No other speakeasy, the patrons declared, could even approach the levels of depraved luxury – of black-market connectivity – of irredeemable deplorability – that one could find at a Shockley's, conveniently located on a world near you.

Of course, this didn't mean that the average Den lived up to its mighty reputation. Some took up an artsy tilt, branding themselves as "The DALÍ" and catering to only the most sophisticated criminals, the types more comfortable manipulating numbers and ideas than anything physical. Others were used as factories for producing fully legal goods with less licit sources of labour. At least one became a convent for an order of military nuns. But every once and a while, a sufficiently-affluent crime lord would arise and forge a new Den, one that truly relished in its opulent degeneracy, to remind the Spiral Underground why Shockley's name was feared.

Nezf was a tenant at one such establishment. Despite his circumstances, he'd never really thought of himself as a criminal: from a young age, violence had repulsed him to the point that he'd become obsessed with the idea of the deathless paradise beyond the end of the universe. He'd dedicated decades to finding a way to the City of the Saved – decades squandered, when the Uptime Gate slammed shut in his face. Overnight, the market for genetic augmentations exploded to the point that a single human gene splice cost more than Nezf would be able to make in several lifetimes.

But then he met Huxley. And Huxley had contacts. Just do enough jobs for me; make it worth my while. I always take care of my friends.

Not that it was particularly comfortable to be Huxley's 'friend'. Nezf had seen so many 'friends' punished for arriving late to a briefing that he left his room a full hour ahead of time, just in case anyone stalled him to chat along the way. Of course, no one did, so he was left twiddling his thumbs and looking around the meeting room. The walls were draped in tapestries, but their illustrations were obscured by darkness; the room was illuminated only by the ceiling lamps' dull red glow and some scattered light let in through the crack in the great bronze front door. The long oval table was empty save for a heap of rags in the shadows at the far end. Nezf had initially dismissed it as a pile of someone's laundry, tossed inside by some clueless passerby, but upon closer examination, he started to pick out the shape of a hood and, inside, a wrinkled face clenched into a fierce expression. The woman's moss green eyes were firmly fixed on nothingness, as if she was challenging the air to say something. Had she been there when he'd arrived? Did she think he was being impolite by not greeting her? Nezf decided it was too late to say anything.

"Wade!" a voice boomed, and the crack in the door widened. "Long time no see, you old rogue!"

The crone leaned forward out of the shadows, and her face cracked into a lopsided smile. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

The door eased shut, and the woman – Wade – extended a single weathered hand out of her sleeve toward the new arrival. “How’ve you been, Tabre–”
“Please, just T, nowadays,” the voice said. “Easier for everyone to say.” A hand on a slinky-like arm shot up to grab Wade’s; another slapped onto the table, and up came a spherical mass of sinewy flesh. He plopped into a seat. “I’m hanging in there, you?”

“To be honest, I just heard a little rumour, and it’s been keeping me preoccupied.”
T’s blobby head bobbed into a clumsy nod. “I think I know just the one; don’t worry, it’s certified bullshit.”

“Yeah?” Wade shrugged, ruffling her cloak. Out tumbled a strand of orange hair, dulled by age and time. “I wasn’t so sure.”
“Well – I remember the Utterlost Accords, so if it is true, we’re all a lot more screwed than we could possibly imagine.” T’s unnaturally wide mouth stretched into a toothless smile, but Wade just harrumphed.

“So …” The monster looked around, its eyes rolling right over Nezf in his chair. “Whatcha doing here?”
“Hux called about a mission. Sounded important,” Wade said. “You? Just passing by?”

“No – guess I’m here for the same reason. My sorry retired ass couldn’t say no. Who’d have thought, the two of us working together again, eh?”
“Can’t be,” Wade said, her lips pursed. “You know how Hux gets about reusing old teams.”

T’s eyestalks blinked one by one. “As you said. Important mission.”
The bronze door slammed open and revealed the silhouette of a tall clown. His spindly fingers stretched into the room and his sharpened nails clattered on the door. And as the figure stepped into the light Nezf saw that his forehead and hair had been stretched and molded into a grotesque parody of a jester’s hat.

Wade withdrew back into her cloak. “Oh goddammit, not this guy.”
“A a aha a,” cackled the newcomer. “What’s the problem, hey?” His neck moved in a pointlessly unnerving way as he crept up to the table. “You don’t like your c-crazy friend, Ka(h) Loquo?” His voice cracked into another guttural cackle.

He stalked up to the seat next to Nezf, jerking it back from the table and leering down at him. “Ooooh, fresh meat!” Ka(h) licked his lips.
Nezf cleared his throat and met the clown’s uncomfortably close gaze. “I’m Nezf.”

“N-e-z-f,” Ka(h) echoed, sounding it out. “That’s one for the dictionary, isn’t it?” He spun the chair around and straddled it, still staring at Nezf. “Well well well, we’re going to have some fun, won’t we, you and I?”
Nezf opened his mouth to stammer a reply, but he was saved by the back door, which slid open with a hydraulic hiss and unleashed a wave of flavored steam. The sound and the smoke were obviously designed to intimidate newcomers, but to familiar employees it just came across as pointless and obnoxious. Today’s chosen scent was a sweet vanilla, and Nezf breathed deeply before discovering a strong and unpleasant coppery afterscent.

Out of the cloud emerged a towering hulk of a human. Every inch of skin, tightly wrapped around the giant’s bulging muscles, was covered by tribal tattoos tracing out intricate geometric patterns; the one branded across its chest read “GREETINGS”. Behind the titan scuttled Huxley herself, the six pairs of eyes on her elongated forehead flitting around the room before settling on the four employees seated before her. She sat in the throne at the

table's head.
"Good evening, lovebugs," she clicked. "Let's get to business."

Nezf swallowed.
"I'm sure you've all heard the rumours, yes? The War … is ending." Huxley looked around the room, judging everyone's reactions. Nezf's mouth fell open – what would this mean for the Uptime Gate? Wade and T exchanged glances; after a beat, Ka(h) moved to say something. Hux chose to cut him off. "Incredible, I know, but my sources are very reliable, trust me. When the armistice is signed – which I expect it will be, within the week – the Houses will be shuttling all their weapons away to some impregnable arsenal. Status quo antebellum. No more wrecks on the frontier to salvage; no more soldiers to bribe. The weapons trade is gonna go *poof*."

The subtext was obvious: and with it, so would her business.
"Now, I'm very tempted to try and send you to sabotage the talks, for the good of us all. But it's likely that wouldn't go very well, wouldn't you agree?"

"Sure," Ka(h) said.
"Yes, thank you, Mr Loquo; as you know, the question was rhetorical." One of Huxley's hands clattered onto the table. "Instead, I think we should go for one last big dash. Grab all that we can before the cookie jar closes forever, right? So, here's the plan."

And here came the trinkets. One of her pincer-like hands slid an ivory cube onto the table. Its sides were engraved with hieroglyphs that Nezf recognised as Homeworlder script.
"This here is the Greater Key. Obviously not its real name, but no point in telling you all every bit of gossip, okay? It's a weapon. A superweapon. My sources can't make their minds up about what it looks like: most say it's a box with circular writing, but one person is pretty certain that it's a metal rod, so keep your eyes out. But what everyone agrees on –" and here she paused dramatically – "is where it's being kept."

A red painted marble clattered onto the table. "A human colony world in the Amazolian system. The Plume Coteries originally called it the Revelatory Majesty Sphere, but they signed it over to another group in some peace treaty and it got renamed 'Roger's Magic Sphere'. Stupid, right? We're calling it RMS. Anyway, in the build-up to the War, the House Military took it and stuck a base there."
"… a base?" Wade's voice floated out from her hood. "How will we hit that? They'll see us coming from an aeon away."

"Exactly," Huxley purred. "That's why I'd like to introduce you all to the Shift."
A Shift? Nezf had heard stories about idea-based lifeforms, but he'd never come close to meeting one. Everyone froze for a moment to check their perceptions before looking around the room for some sign of a conceptual entity.

"What Shift?" T finally asked.
Hux gestured at the expressionless giant standing by the door. Nezf noticed a section of its chest tattoo now read "HELLO EVERYONE".

Ka(h) clicked his tongue dismissively. "That's not a Shift."
"Yes, it is," Huxley said. "I gave it a body."

"And how the hell did you do that?"
"This hunk of meat came across my path all dazed and confused a while ago, and … well, just look at those tattoos, right? Meant to be, really. The Shift gives orders for how the body should move, and then you can read its words in the writing on the skin."

Wade thought for a moment. “That’s extremely fucked up.”
Huxley gave her a scathing look. “Yeah, well, ‘extremely fucked up’ here is gonna make this mission possible, so you can thank it when you get through the labyrinths safely, okay?”

“Gotcha, Hux,” Wade said, leaning back into her chair. “Didn’t mean anything by it.”
T’s gigantic lips curled into a frown. “Hold up, the labyrinths? The Houses shut down all the major entrances and exits ages ago, and the minor ones are practically unnavigable.”

“As I said: that’s where the Shift comes in. It knows the labyrinths like the back of its new body, and T, you know that you’re the best pilot this side of Event One. Between the two of you, this’ll be a walk in the park.”
“Well …” T looked pained. “I’m not so sure, Hux.”

“Yeah,” Ka(h) butted in. “I’m not so sure myself. A direct hit on a House Military base?” He looked around the table incredulously. “I thought I was the mad one, but you’ve gone full crazy. What’ll stop them from blowing us to pieces, hey?”
Huxley ignored him, keeping her eyes focused on everyone else. “As I said, the base is inactive, and with the Peace talks going on, an attack will be the last thing they expect. In fact, a lot of the troops have been diverted to the negotiations. That’s what my sources tell me, and my sources –”

“They’re very reliable? We know,” Ka(h) hissed. One by one, Hux’s eyes flicked over to stare at him. “But the way I see it, the Houses would only leave some superweapon undefended if they knew damn well that it could take perfectly good care of itself.”
Huxley curled to her full height, staring down at Ka(h). “Who’s the expert here, when it comes to the Houses? You know I’ve been watching the Homeworld since their old war king was just magistrate. You know I predicted the Sixth Wave, and you know how it helped line your pockets. I see through their manufactured randomness. I know how the Houses think.” Huxley’s eyes were slits. “And I am telling you right now, there won’t be anything defending against a heist on the base.”

Ka(h) considered this for a moment and said, “Nah.” He scooted his chair back from the table and stood up. “I’m out of here.”
“Participation isn’t exactly voluntary. I’ve already told you far too much for that.”

“Wellllll… I’m not participating.”
“That’s fine,” Huxley said, and she pointed a single finger at him.

A beam of vibration burst out of the ceiling and slammed into Ka(h) Loquo’s head. His spine crumbled, and his body melted into a quivering puddle on the ground where he had just been standing. Nezf watched with dismay as the goop seeped around the legs of his chair.
Hux gave a rattly sigh. “I was hoping I wouldn’t have to do that. I suppose the Shift can fill in as brawn, right Shift?”

RIGHT, the tattoos replied.
“Now,” Hux resumed, “the labyrinth should slip you in close to RMS, so the base will assume you’ve already been checked, and it should be easy enough to do the last part of the approach. Just in case, I’m fitting you with a ship I bought from one of the Yvleperal’s allies, so it shouldn’t draw any suspicion at all. And once you’re in, you’ll just take care of the skeleton crew and make it out with the Greater Key. Think you four can do all that?”

“Sure thing,” T said.

“Rhetorical question: I know you can do it; that’s why you’re all here.” She clicked to herself contentedly before continuing. “Wade, you call the strategy shots, okay? Please understand that it’s extremely important to me that you find the Greater Key, but if it comes down to it, anything is better than nothing. Grab what you can get and make it back safe.

“That said, Nezf?” Her claws reached out toward him in a mockery of a pleading gesture. “You’re still going to answer to Wade, but you’re in charge of finding the Greater Key and bringing it back to me, okay? I know this is your first mission with the big bad boys, but you’re the best burglar I know, so *please* don’t fuck this up.”
Nezf grimaced. “I’ll do my best, Huxley.”

“Perfect.” Huxley bared her fangs at the four of them. “If you’re successful, which I’m sure you will be, I’ll cut you each one-sixth of the profit. Sound good?”
One-sixth? Nezf couldn’t believe his ears. If the Greater Key was as valuable as Huxley made it sound, that would be more than enough to fund the gene splice. He looked around the table; Wade and T looked unimpressed, and the Shift’s face was as blank as ever.

“Well then,” Huxley continued, “all of you can head on out and my associate will take you to our local secret labyrinth entrance. Blindfolded, of course. The vehicle will be waiting for you there, okay? Top of the line; no expense was spared, believe me.
“Oh, one more thing,” Hux called. “Don’t even think about pulling any shit, got it?”

Well that’s weird. Look at this.

Empty space? I don’t get it.
That’s the thing: there aren’t any records of this “RMS” planet in the archives.

What? That can’t be true. Do you think there’s a mistake in this reconstruction?
You know as much as I do.

Well, where’d we find this body?
Orbiting the far regions, down near the black hole.

Hmm. That doesn’t help anything.

Their ship was a minimalistic diplomatic craft from the Plume Coteries. It was sleek and small, designed for the Coteries’ dwarfish members, which made it ideal for their mission but also uncomfortably cramped. As the team climbed up through the hatch, the Shift and T seemed to take up the entirety of the circular cabin by themselves; however, when T approached the control panel, his stubby legs unravelled into his wide body and his crudely-formed face folded open to reveal a network of spindly, razor-thin neurons. The web stretched out over the controls and oozed into the machine, and as Wade and Nezf settled into their seats, the engine purred to life.
From deep inside the machine, T’s voice echoed, “You won’t slow me down, right?” A tendril with a small visual sensor turned pointedly toward the Shift, whose body was facing the empty wall.

The tattoos on its back reorganised. I AM PUTTING THE DIRECTIONS DIRECTLY ONTO A SCREEN HE CAN SEE
"Oh? So desperate to get a moment alone?" Wade jerked forward in her seat. "None of that shit. You'll show them to all of us."

OK OK, the tattoos read. Instead of melting away into their usual dreamlike patterns, they started flickering faster than Nezf could follow, spelling out abbreviated directions and delicate steering suggestions.
Nezf had no clue what the labyrinth was and he wasn't going to ask now, but based on what Huxley and T had said, it seemed to be a secret and dangerous way to travel across time and space, one the Houses couldn't monitor. The walls streaming past the small window looked almost too normal; if not for the situational context, he probably wouldn't have realised that they weren't just in an oddly-decorated back alley of the Den. It felt inappropriate to be flying a ship through what amounted to a hallway; there were even occasional passers-by: a green man covered in thorns; a minotaur carrying a book; the skeleton of a gigantic beast. When Nezf let himself fall into a bit of a trance, he could even almost make out a pattern in the walls' random colours.

Wade leaned conspiratorially toward Nezf, shattering his reverie. "These two and their machine minds, eh? At least I trust T; we know how the Houses hurt him. Not like …" and she made an obscene gesture at the Shift.
I SENSED THAT, the tattoos read.

Wade snorted. "*Sensed*? You really are a robot! Come on, tell us your story. How'd you learn the labyrinth so well?"
The tattoos kept flickering with directions, apparently ignoring her. Nezf sighed.

"Did you hear me?" Wade asked.
YES

"Do you plan on answering?"
NO

"And why the fuck is that?"
No answer came from the tattoos.

Wade leaned back, pretending to address Nezf. "Because it knows it's Homeworlder scum. Isn't that right, Shift?"
Nezf frowned. "Why do you care where it's from? I don't think it matters, as long as it does its job."

FOCUS, the tattoos read on the Shift's back. On cue, the ship gracefully flipped up and sideways before continuing smoothly down a side passage. T grumbled, "A little more warning would be nice next time."
"At least retirement hasn't dulled your touch," Wade called up to the pilot. She turned back to Nezf. "I'm guessing you've never worked with a Homeworlder before?"

He didn't reply; that was answer enough.
"Well here's a primer," Wade continued. "They don't give a damn about anyone besides themselves. They'll promise you everything, and then they'll dump you as soon as you're inconvenient. Just look what they did to T: the Houses even see themselves as raw material to beat into tools."

Behind Wade's back, the tattoos changed: WHO HURT YOU
"What did they do to T?" Nezf blurted before Wade could turn around. "I, I've never seen

anyone like him."

"Oh, that's right, you've not met. T's from the First Wave. One of the last ones left. The Houses murdered him three hundred times, torturing each individual part of his body so he'd perfectly meld into one of their timeships … and then they sent him to Mohandassa, where the ship was completely useless, and he had to ditch it in the time eddies. He's been working for Hux ever since."
"You forgot the part where all the other pilots died in the battle," T called out.

Wade smiled ruefully. "He and I worked together for three years on an undercover mission. Ten years ago now, wasn't it?"
"Has it really been that long?" T sighed. "I still wish we'd asked for a bigger percentage on that one."

YOU MISSED A TURN. The tattoos blazed urgently on the Shift's back, even though Nezf knew the message was just in his perception.
"Oh, shit," T muttered. The ship began to flip up and sideways, but there was no passage to flip into, so it settled uneasily into the centre of the tunnel. "Umm. Where are we?"

CORRIDORS ALREADY SHIFTED, the Shift said. THINKING
The craft slowed to a stop. Outside the window, the colours on the walls had faded to a dull red, and the walls themselves had evolved from mundane brick into something that resembled rancid flesh. Chunks of the wall seemed to be oozing and bulging out toward the ship in thin tendrils; as each one reached closer, the cabin rattled with rapid vibrations.

"Think faster," Wade suggested.
The sound of a dull roar swept through the tunnel, shaking the ship on a level deeper than matter; simultaneously, the high ceiling of the labyrinth began to crash downwards toward the craft. The ship lunged backwards, spinning through the collapsing corridor. T was picking paths arbitrarily, and though they were outpacing the crumbling labyrinth, the cacophony continued to grow in intensity, shaking the cabin until it looked like a blur.

With a jerk, the capsule stopped, and everything snapped back into focus. They were poised on the edge of a precipice. In every direction, the corridors were unfolding into uncountable pathways, a fractal tree of infinite diverging choices.
"Some help, Shifty?" T sounded like he was speaking through gritted teeth, barely audible over the din.

The Shift's tattoos came to life, flickering instructions again – slower this time, either from cautiousness or uncertainty. The ship plummeted downwards into the maze, manoeuvred its way through the intersections at increasing speed. The noise faded in the distance, but the labyrinth walls outside the windows also grew fainter and fainter in colour. Within minutes, they were completely dark, leaving the cabin illuminated only by a faint electric light.
STOP, the tattoos blazed. WE SHOULD BE SAFE HERE

The ship came to a halt. FOR A MOMENT, the Shift added.
Wade leaned over Nezf to squint through the shadow, but there was nothing to be seen. She glanced back at the Shift, accidentally flicking her cloak onto Nezf. "Can you get us back to the RMS exit?"

MISSED OUR CONNECTION
Pulling the cloak away from his face, Nezf gave Wade a panicked look. "Why can't we just

go back the way we came?"

"The labyrinth rebuilds itself," she said. "We were almost caught in it back there. Are there any other exits nearby?"
NO – the tattoos visibly paused as the Shift thought – OR YES

Wade's green eyes narrowed into slits. "Which is it?"
The Shift's face limply flopped onto its shoulder to stare at her. SOMETHING IS WRONG

"I knew this was a bad idea," T called out from inside the instrument panel. "Outside the parts reinforced by the Houses, the labyrinth is unnavigable."
IT IS NOT LIKE THAT, the Shift had already replied. THE ENERGY FLOW IN THE CORRIDORS HAS CHANGED

"Changed how?" The frown was audible in Wade's voice.
LIKE A NEW EXIT HAS BEEN OPENED

"Impossible," T scoffed.
An echo of the roar bounced through the passage, and the ship rattled. Nezf cowered in his seat.

"This new exit, where does it go?" Wade yelled over the growing noise.
I DO NOT KNOW, the Shift said, while another portion of its skin started showing directions. The ship begrudgingly accelerated into the darkness. BUT I SUSPECT IT IS QUITE CLOSE

Wade had withdrawn into her hood, thinking. "And there aren't any others nearby?"
NONE WITHIN REACH. The tattoos morphed. I AM NOT SURE HOW MUCH LONGER WE CAN PUSH OUR LUCK

Wade swore, then spat on the ground. "Alright. Let's take the exit."
"Wait, what?" T said, and the craft slowed. "It could put us anywhere!"

"That's a chance we need to take," Wade said. "We'll cross that bridge, but right now we just need to get out of here."
T sounded frantic. "There's no way I'm just rolling that die."

"Trust me, T!" Wade yelled.
The ship hesitated, then careened sideways. The Shift's directions flickered faster and faster, the engine squealing in protest as the labyrinth's roar became deafening. And then, with the sound of a house being torn apart by a tornado, the labyrinth vanished from the ship's window. In the same instant, the engine coughed and died, and the windows clicked off. Nezf exhaled a breath that he felt he had been holding for an eternity.

"It worked!" Nezf gasped.
"The navigation's fried," T said, extracting himself from the control panel. "That last jolt killed every circuit; the ship's as good as junk."

Wade rapped a knuckle on the wall where the window used to be. "Where are we?"
I AM UNSURE, the Shift replied. I DID NOT RECOGNISE THE EXIT

"You mentioned," T said, his voice sounding muffled by his own flesh.
Nezf was pulling himself back together. "I thought the whole point of the labyrinth was that the corridors always shift?"

“Okay, that might have been an oversimplification,” T explained. His body now filled up most of the cabin, and Wade moved into Nezf’s seat, pushing him onto the floor near the exit hatch. “The whole thing is an unchanging structure; it’s just rotating through high dimensions. Makes it near impossible to predict.”
I THINK WE MAY BE VERY CLOSE TO RMS, the Shift said. VERY CLOSE

“Well that’s convenient,” Wade noted. “Did anyone see what it looked like before the windows shut off? And whose bright idea was electric windows anyway?”
“I think I saw some sort of warehouse,” Nezf said. “Maybe a hangar.”

“What kind of hanger?” T’s body was folding itself back into a compact sphere, but his eyestalks hovered motionless in space, staring at Nezf.
Nezf shrugged. “Bright. Big. Bright. I only got a glimpse.”

T’s eyes flicked toward the Shift. “Could it be that we’re *on* RMS?”
IT IS POSSIBLE

“But extremely unlikely,” Wade added. “Well, why don’t we just peek through the door?”
Everyone looked at each other for a second, but no one seemed to have a counterpoint. With a wave from Wade’s robed hand, Nezf scooted out of the way, undid the lock, and flipped open the hatch.

The ship sat in the corner of an empty hangar. The walls and ceiling were blank, the room’s apparent sterility belied only by a sprinkling of grit across the otherwise-blank floor. Off in the far corner was a tall, wide doorway leading to a room lit by a flashing red light; the only other interruption of the walls’ monotony was the distinctively jagged shape of the House Military’s logo.
Nezf slammed the hatch shut again.

“Well,” Wade said, “this is significantly more interesting than expected. We’re exactly where we wanted to be.”
T’s pseudo-eyebrows crinkled. “We wanted to be approaching RMS from a comfortable distance and getting proper permission to enter; this is exactly where we wanted to *not* be. Who knows how many alarms we’re setting off right now?”

“But the element of surprise is on our side,” Wade countered. “We need to move soon, before the Military comes to smoke us out. But first, Burgler?” She looked over her shoulder at Nezf. “Be a good chap and go investigate.”
“Good idea,” T said, but Nezf was already bristling. “Umm, Huxley said my mission is to get the Greater Key. You’re the one for dealing with the Military.”

Wade looked unimpressed. “Who would you rather we send?”
“... T? He’s a Homeworlder! If anyone’s out there, they’ll be his people. He can talk to them best.”

“Not quite, kid,” T said. “This is a new Wave. I defected half a century ago; I’m on so many watchlists, my biodata would light up like a supernova. If we didn’t need to find a new ship, I wouldn’t be leaving this one.”
“Well then” – Nezf’s eyes darted around the small cabin – “why doesn’t Wade go? I mean, she’s, she’s the one who matters the least.”

Wade made as if to stand up, but she remembered her height and settled for an aggressive look instead. “Please explain what you meant by that.”
“You’re human!” Nezf blurted. “Obviously! If you die, you’ll just resurrect in the City and get to do it all over again!”

She cocked her head. “You’re not a posthuman?”
“Hey you two,” T interrupted. “The Shift has something to say.”

THIS BODY HAS A MINOR PSYCHIC FIELD, the Shift’s tattoos read. I COULD EXTEND ITS RANGE AND MEASURE HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE NEARBY
“… making an estimate of the population of the base. Very nice,” Wade said. “Do it.”

OK, the tattoos read, melting into a dreamlike state.
Nezf looked at Wade and said, “I’m a Daktili.”

She shushed him. “Let the Shift focus,” T added.
“Fine, fine,” Nezf muttered.

IT SEEMS THE BASE IS SPLIT INTO FOUR SECTORS, the Shift said. THERE ARE MANY MINDS IN THE OTHER THREE
“And in this one?” Wade asked.

JUST US FOUR
“See? No danger at all.” Wade turned to Nezf, now speaking softly. “You’re our burglar for a reason: you’re the best at getting around unseen. Just go out there, scout around, and come back to tell us what we’re dealing with. You won’t need to talk to anyone or anything. Hux clearly thought you could handle a House Military base or you wouldn’t be here, right?”

“Gotta earn that one-sixth,” T added.
Nezf sighed. “Fine. I’ll do it.” He scooted to uncover the hatch, looking back only once before opening it and slipping through. It shut behind him, leaving the other three in silence.

“So …” T said after a moment. “Shift, how are you finding your new body?”
ACCEPTABLE, the Shift said. IT HAS BEEN SOME TIME SINCE I HAVE BEEN ABLE TO INTERFACE WITH THE WORLD IN THIS WAY

“You were really something with the directions back there,” T said. “I’ve never even heard of someone being able to track down an exit like that. I’m sorry I doubted you.”
PURE SELF-PRESERVATION

“Ahh.” T gave Wade an awkward look.

FOR WHAT IT IS WORTH, the Shift continued, I HAVE NEVER HEARD OF NEW LABYRINTH EXITS BEING OPENED. Its body’s eyes blinked one by one. WHY WOULD THE HOUSES HAVE BUILT ONE TO RMS
“Maybe as a back path to the Greater Key, in case of emergency?” T said. “I haven’t heard much about it, but if this is the superweapon I think it is, it’s some War-ending level stuff.”

Wade shifted in her seat. “Either way, we certainly can’t keep sitting here and waiting for the House Military to smoke us out.”
WAIT, the Shift’s tattoos read. THIS BODY HAS A MINOR PSYCHIC FIELD

“Oh?” She considered this for a moment, then leaned forward. “Could you extend it and try to estimate the population of the base?”
I CAN TRY, the Shift said, and the words in its tattoos dissolved. After a moment, it continued, THE BASE SEEMS TO HAVE FOUR SECTORS AND THERE ARE MANY MINDS IN THE OTHER THREE

“And in this one?” Wade asked.
ONLY US

“This sector is totally deserted? That doesn’t make any sense,” T said.
Wade shrugged. “Well, there’s really only one way to find out. Shifty, you’re the brawn; be a good chap and go investigate for us.”

The Shift hesitated briefly, then nodded. It eased open the hatch and slipped through with unexpected nimbleness, but as it left, its tattoos flicked through a few messages: STOP WATCHING THIS RECONSTRUCTION, then STOP READING THIS STORY, then BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE. The hatch clicked shut.
Wade immediately turned to T. “What do you make of that guy?”

“My guess is an agent of the Remonstration Bureau. It got on Mrs Foyle’s bad side, and bam!” He snapped two tendrils. “Shiftified and looking for a home.”
“No way Foyle has that kind of power,” Wade said, leaning back in her seat. “I’m standing by my Homeworlder theory.”

“But why would a Homeworlder have the labyrinths memorised?”
“That’s the thing – what if it was an Eremite? One self-mutilation too many, and it found itself without a body.”

“Oh come on,” T said. “There’s no such thing as Eremites.”
Wade looked at him askance. “And why’s that?”

“Ritual priests from the beginning of time?” he scoffed. “At best, it’s propaganda spread by Faction Paradox filth to try and legitimise their treason. Don’t tell me you seriously believe it?”
“Oh Tabrenilsodvoravitas,” she sighed. “Just because they weren’t in your history textbooks doesn’t mean they’re not real.”

T harrumphed, and the two sat in silence. Eventually, Wade spoke. “Well, what are we waiting for? We can’t just keep sitting here waiting for the House Military to smoke us out.”
The hatch eased open and the Shift poked its head in. Its forehead tattoo read, COME QUICKLY! Wade jumped up and sprang out the exit, T following right behind.

Hmm, I think the reconstruction glitched for a minute there.

Is this really what it was like?
What?

You know. War in Heaven.
Oh. I always forget you were born after the end.

Answer the question, old man.

No, the War wasn’t like this. It wasn’t really “like” anything. The universe was so much bigger back then, and every piece of it, start to end, was tangled up in the fight. A fight bigger than any mortal could possibly comprehend. How can you sum up a conflict so all-encompassing, so fundamental? Even after all these years, part of me still can’t believe that it’s truly over.

…
Does that answer your question?

Of course not. But no one from the War is any good at answering questions.

Compared to the room where the ship had crashed, this part of the sector was immense. The ceiling and walls were shrouded in a thick mixture of fog and smoke that seemed to pulse with the flashing red light. The Shift had barrelled into the mist, out of sight of Wade and T, and the pair blindly crept forward in the direction they'd last seen it.
Inside the sea of smog, time seemed to flow at its own pace. Wade would shamble through the blinking obscurity for thirty seconds or ten minutes before finding the next pocket of rubble: here a fragment of battle armour, a shattered gauntlet or a totemic gun; there a puddle of Homeworlder ichor, already mostly seeped into the dark floor. The room was alive, the red light its heartbeat, and Wade was its puppet, being led from clue to clue until she could uncover its fate. Occasionally she or T remembered to call out for the Shift, but there was never any reply. Just the blankness of the cloud.

She didn't know how long they'd been searching when they arrived at what must have been the centre of the battle. It hurt to look at. The other room had obviously been a leftover from early in the War, clean of the vulgarity that marked the later Waves, but here the House Military had been united with its biology. Everything reeked of raw time.
T gave his bobbly head a slow shake. "I haven't seen anything like this since … for a long time."

"What do you think happened?"
A solemn look. "The enemy. What else?"

A quiet whimpering noise came from somewhere behind them – Which way had they come from, again? – Wade felt as if she'd been snapped out of a dream. "Hello?" she called out. The noise repeated itself.
"It could be anything," T warned, but she was already gone. He curled himself into a ball and rolled after her.

As they approached, the mewling turned into a voice: "Thank gods you've come." Wade saw the silhouette of a tall figure, and she was preparing herself for a fight when she recognised its tattoos. "Where the fuck have you been?" she asked the Shift.
Before it could answer, a small shape sprinted up out of the fog. "You have to help me," it panted, and it crashed into the Shift, who only looked down at it coldly.

T spun up and unfurled into an offensive stance. "Identify yourself!" he shouted.
The figure stared at him, shocked, then stumbled backwards. It stood only two and a half feet tall, a misshapen caricature of a humanoid. It unpleasantly reminded Wade of her big toe. "That's the thing! That's the thing. I'm … not exactly sure who I am," it said. "Please, you have to help me remember."

"It's not from this base, that's for sure," T said. "Might have followed us from the labyrinth?"
It scampered up to Wade, but she stepped backwards, keeping it at arm's length. "Did you follow us?" she asked it. "What are you doing here?"

"There's a reason!" it babbled. "An important reason why I'm here, I know it. I used to

know it. Everything is disappearing. Please help me."
Wade leaned forward, examining the shape a bit more closely. "T, is it just the fog or does this thing seem a little fuzzy around the edges? Almost as if …" She trailed off.

"I feel I know you, I really do!" a voice sobbed.
"… as if …" One of T's eyestalks flicked toward Wade impatiently. "What are you talking about?"

"I lost my train of thought," she finished with a shrug. "There's something unsettling about this place."
"It's a House Military base," T said. "Of course it's unsettling." He shook his head. "Coming here was a mistake."

Wade was looking around. "Is fog an ordinary feature?"
He thought for a moment. "To tell you the truth, I'm not exactly sure."

"And don't you feel like we were just talking to someone?"
"… not really?" T's eyes swivelled around the room. "I feel like I would've remembered that. And I don't see any– Are you crying?"

"What? Of course not," Wade scowled, turning her back to him. She raised a hand to her face and found two hot tears dripping down her cheek, then wiped them away with a frown. She cleared her throat. "Where's the Shift gotten to?"
On cue, the hulk emerged from the pulsing mist. RIGHT HERE.

Wade levelled a single finger at it. "Stop doing that! We were looking for you for ages."
SORRY, I'VE JUST BEEN THINKING ABOUT HOW WE MIGHT GET OUT OF HERE, the Shift said. I'M NOT MUCH USE AS A MECHANIC, BUT OVER HERE I FOUND SOMETHING THAT COULD HELP!

"Lead us there, but stay close," T said, and his slinky hands shot out to grab Wade and the Shift by their arms. After only a few seconds of pacing through the smog, the makeshift chain arrived at one of the room's walls. Sitting on the floor under a colossal House Military logo was a pristine golden sphere, twenty feet in diameter, with a large tinted window.
T breathed deeply. "Oh, look at this," he said. "This must be one of the new models. What are they up to with the mechanical forms? 94-forms? 95?"

"I thought timeships were all humanoid now." Wade looked around for other technology, but there was only mist.
"Well apparently not – this is definitely new. Oh, just look at those weapons systems," he cooed, creeping toward the ship. "I've never seen anything like it."

THIS IS WONDERFUL, the Shift said. LET'S LOAD UP AND ESCAPE!
"Yes! I could blast a hole through the ceiling," T said.

"No, not yet," Wade said. "We need to find the … thing, first."
T's eyes pivoted to stare at her impatiently. "What thing?"

"You know. What the boss sent us here to get."
"Oh yeah," T said, not moving from his place. "Do you think it's still here?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"
"Just look around," T said. "There was obviously a fight. The enemy doesn't just attack every old base; they must have come here for the weapon."

“That doesn’t mean they left with it,” Wade said. “The House Military obviously didn’t just let them walk right in. And it doesn’t seem like it went too well for either side.”
“I wonder …” T looked around the room. “Why do you think they haven’t cleaned up?”

The Shift stepped forward. WADE, HOW ABOUT YOU AND I GO CHECK THE REST OF THE ROOM WHILE T GETS READY TO LEAVE?
“Yeah, sure,” Wade said. “But before we go, let me talk to T for a moment, okay?”

TAKE YOUR TIME, said the Shift, and it wandered away. Wade grabbed T’s slinky arm and pulled him to the side, away from the ship. The House Military logo stared down at them.
“Does the Shift seem … cheerier, to you?” she whispered.

T’s eyebrows folded into an imitation of an incredulous expression. “You know it lives in our heads, right? Whispering doesn’t do much good.”
“Still,” Wade sighed. “There’s just something weird about –”

“Look at the sign!”
The swirl of the serpent in the House Military logo now read “FINALLY YOU NOTICE”. The pattern rearranged. THAT’S NOT ME

“What’s not you?” T said. Wade looked in the direction where the tattooed body had walked, but it had vanished into the fog.
THE TATTOOS – the words on the sign flickered, overwriting themselves – FORCED OUT – SOMETHING IS HERE

“Something?” T’s eyes flicked between Wade and the sign before one settled on each. “Something like what?”
IT ERASED NEZF

“Nezf?” Wade said. “Who’s Nezf?”
The Shift replied, IS THIS A MISSION FOR ONLY 3 PEOPLE

Wade took a moment to realise the implication. “… my god. How many of us has it erased? It’s rewriting time …”
“Impossible,” T sputtered. “My biodata’s reinforced. My history is protected!”

NO YOU IMBECILE, the words formed. NOT YOUR HISTORY – YOUR MEMORY
“Utter nonsense,” T said, and he paced away.

“… it makes sense,” Wade said, absentmindedly brushing her cheek. “A conceptual predator. Bred by the enemy to feed on memories: our memories; others’ memories of us. They must’ve unleashed it during the attack and lost control.”
T waddled back. “How do we even know this is the real Shift?”

“And that’s why the Houses haven’t cleaned up this sector,” Wade continued, now looking at T. “They’ve forgotten it ever existed.”
T stared back up at her. “And if this is true, why isn’t it eating our memories?”

YET

“It’s already in our minds.” Wade was beginning to pace. “It’s just a matter of time.”
I KNOW HOW TO FIX THIS said the words on the wall.

“Well?”

I

I KNEW
“Come on, Shift,” she said. “Please try and remember. I know you can.”

The words faded away and the sign reverted to the House Military logo.
“Shift?”

No answer.
“Oh, fuck this shit,” Wade said. She had frozen in place, her eyes flitting around the room like she was reading an invisible flowchart. “We need to get out of here. I think I know a ritual to get us out, and then it’ll be easy to wipe our recent memories.”

T slowly turned to Wade. “A ritual?”
“Bloodline to bloodline in … in …” Wade banged her palm against her forehead. “Granddammit, come on.”

“You… You’re Faction Paradox,” T finally said.
“We’ll talk about it later, okay?” she said. “We need to focus; this is serious.”

T was shaking his head. “All this time, and you’ve been working for Faction Paradox.”
“Did you not hear the Shift?” Wade snapped. “I’m trying to save our lives. I …” She looked around the room. “I think I need an offering.”

When she turned around, T was gone, vanished into the timeship. He had slotted in perfectly.
“Shit,” she muttered under her breath, and she moved to the ship’s window, palms outwards. “T, please come out of there.” There was no reply. “Please, T. I’m in charge of strategy, right? What you’re doing isn’t the best survival strategy. Trust me.”

“*Trust you?*” he finally said. “Fuck you, Wade. You wouldn’t be in charge if everyone knew you were Faction scum. You keep this shit from me for *years* and still think you can give me orders? You bitch, I trusted you with my *life*.”
“And I’m trying to save it,” she said. “The idea is already in our minds; you fly away, you contaminate the rest of the universe.”

She could hear something like a distant engine revving, but the timeship didn’t move. Eventually, T replied, his voice more anguished than Wade had ever heard it. “You don’t understand what it’s like,” he cried, “to be apart from part of your own body for so long.”
“I don’t,” she admitted, “and we can sort that out. But first we need to fix this. You can see what’s happening. You’ve noticed, we’re both forgetting things. You’ve even forgotten how to fly, haven’t you? Please–”

T screamed, and the ship’s weapons systems lashed out, cleaving a gash in the ceiling. The smog began to stream out of the room, and Wade looked down at the bone sticking out of her shoulder. There was no arm on the floor, no blood: it had been vaporised and the wound instantly cauterised by the weapon.
Wade tried to swear, but with a jolt she realised that her mouth was already busy screaming, and she couldn’t seem to stop. In fact, she couldn’t move at all. So instead, she focused on the pain. *Show me a way out, spirits.*

And there appeared before her a thick cylinder of burnished metal. It was being pulled toward her by the escaping gas, rolling across the floor. Inviting her to reach out. Inviting her to touch it. And Wade’s shadow reached out to the Greater Key, and the Greater Key reached out to her, and with a hiss it snapped into her hand.

When she opened her eyes, the universe lay before her. It appeared to her not as a processed picture filtered through her retina; not as pattern of neurons firing in her visual cortex; but as it really was. There were no worlds, or buildings, or people, or atoms. No life or nonlife or death. Only the swirling clouds of quantum amplitude. The basest level of reality, from which all else emerged.

But Wade looked further, and the clouds froze in time before her, and she perceived the entirety of existence: a frozen diamond, eternal and unchanging, all past and present and future, static in display. The Spiral Infinite. There was the anchoring, and the War, and the Peace, and everything that came after. There was the amaranthine shine of the Houses' great eye, perceiving and defining their cosmic dominion, and there was the deep indigo glitter of their enemy. And there was Wade's body, spasming on the floor, coated in the shadow of the predator.
Wade saw the expanse of time, and she saw the part she had left to play in the unfolding of history. So with a steady breath, she reached out, and she said, "Be gone." And T's timeship, and the House Military base, and RMS: all were perceived, and they were released, and then they were no more.

Well, that was something. I won't pretend that I understood most of it.

Yeah, I'm starting to think you were right about glitches.

Yeah – you'd expect someone to actually show up in a reconstruction of their last days.
That's right! I didn't see this poor sap anywhere.

Where did we find this body, anyway?
It was … well, you know, I don't quite remember.

And To Dust We Shall Return

Alexandra Marchon

Mary-Ann wakes up in the early morning darkness, just before the sun rises, as she always does. As she always has, every day. She pulls herself to her feet, grit burning dully in her still-closed eyes, and thinks of nothing at all.
These are precious, these short moments, these first few delicate instants in drowsy unawareness with the air almost cool on her skin. She doesn't understand it – she never does, until it is gone. Not in that moment. She blinks sleepily instead, knocks on the door-frame to wake the others, pads barefoot into the second room of the two-room house.

There is the kitchen, the window, the vague idea that there is work to be done, that they all need to get moving. Stock to be fed. Fields to be ploughed. A life to be lived. She gets the vague sense that there's something she's missing, but it can hardly be important.

And then the red sun rises. And then she remembers.

It blinds her in the first instant, a sliver of pure scarlet over the eastern horizon, catching the dust bloody and bright in the harsh morning air; she twists away, throws a hand over her face, and that movement alone is enough for the dirty air to burn harsh and sudden in her lungs. She chokes, but it is the memory that bites and rages in her chest, the remembering: the stock are dead, the fields barren, the bed next to her was empty. The wind has flayed down the land to red raw wounded rock and the air is hot and dry and rough and the dust has eaten the world, earth and sky, past and future.
It's been this way for a long time now. She stares out of the kitchen window, clutching the edge of the cold stove, anguished blue eyes the only spot of colour in a brown-and-grey world. It's been this way for a long time.

Her name is Mary-Ann Jennings, and she grew up in a town without walls, on the southern hemisphere of a lonely brown planet on the very edge of the Earth Empire. She moved to her own farm out in the rough dry prairie the day she was married, three days after her fifteenth birthday, and never wandered again. She had her first and only child there, seven years ago. Was happy there. It was a simple life, it wasn't easy, but it was good. That is what she remembers most clearly. It was good.
It happened so slowly. It happened so fast. It didn't rain, and that was all.

It didn't rain, the clouds pooling brown and heavy in the sky instead until the whole world turned sepia-tone, and then the winds came; the air tearing into the ground with such force that the earth itself seemed to shift –
and all those fields seeded and ploughed and waiting only for a drop of water, all the rich dark loam they'd staked their lives on, took to the sky and flew away.

The newspapers called it a Dust Bowl, and then the newspapers stopped coming and they called it only Dust. Thick awful stifling dust, dust that gets into your lungs and into your eyes and under your clothes where it rubs your skin red-raw with every movement, dust that suffocates and blinds and drives insane; dust that is rendered meaningless simply by its omnipresence, like a word repeated so often it ceases to be anything more than an animal noise, stupid and repetitive and so mind-numbingly *tedious* in its horror that it

becomes inconceivable.
Her husband has been gone for some years now. West to the valleys by the salt lakes, said the note he left on the door; to try and find work, find somewhere the wind and the dust hadn't swallowed yet. He'd send for them, once he had a job, a house, a place for her and their child to live again. She has heard nothing.

And every day the dust eats a little more of everything and every day the sun burns redder at the horizon, fighting through the hot gritty air, and still somehow, she keeps moving.
She can't seem to stop moving.

She shakes her head – tears herself away from the window and tears herself apart, a familiar automatic agony as she forces back the memory and the meaning, forces that part of her back into the old shapeless darkness at the back of her head. She knows, by now, in a visceral instinctive way, that one cannot remember and survive; that the only way to endure the meaninglessness of the dust is to be meaningless yourself, to deny your own sentience until it stops being real.
She is walking, back into the bedroom, her hands numb and her mind number, and dully she is aware that it happens this way every day.

"…Mother?"
She pulls them upright as gently as she possibly can, pushes long sandy hair out of their face, murmurs soft comforts to them as they wake; they struggle weakly as she rocks them back and forth, mumble wordless protest, eyes still closed.

"It's morning again, sweetheart," she whispers. "The cow will be hungry. The garden needs watering."
They open their eyes, finally, take a breath. She can feel the gritty air jagged in their small chest, their pain as they cough and shiver; it breaks her heart to hear them, like a shard of glass inside her soul, knocks her senseless and rips her apart and leaves her screaming mindless and uncomprehending in the dry choking dirt. The way it does every day, every morning, every time.

"Hush," she breathes. "Hush now."
She draws the curtains in the other room, sets the table for breakfast, braids her hair as she waits by the stove. She has water heating for coffee, they saved an egg from yesterday, they have a little wheat left; it will be enough. Her child joins her halfway through, and she combs their hair as well, sitting at the rickety table her husband made as a wedding-day gift, ties it up, gives them their bonnet to wear. And then there's no avoiding it any longer. They have to go outside.

Only thistles and weeds still grow in the fields, and it's thistles her child will have to gather, handful by handful, to keep their one remaining milk-cow fed. Thistles that they'll have to drag out of the vegetable garden – they have at least had no jackrabbit epidemics here, no locust plagues, and so they can keep a few dozen plants alive if they are careful. She draws up water from the well first, to water the garden and the animals and themselves, before they go. Every day they must roam a little further, she must dip a little deeper, to keep them all alive, but still every day in the morning they are still here. At least that much: they are here.
She can't stay with her child, as much as she wishes it. There is something else that she must do. She finds her wide-brimmed hat and takes her bag under her arm and sets off south, along a road that's long since almost completely worn away, heading to town. As she does every day.

The town is not called Dust. The planet is called Dust, or perhaps only the apocalypse was, and she doesn't think any of them can now remember which came first – the place or its death – or why it matters. Like its namesake, it has seeped into everything.
Here: a collection of buildings shimmering on the heat-wave-warped horizon, little wood-and-metal rectangles like some god's abandoned game of dice, skeletons both human and machine sinking into the dust. They have a town hall, a church, a jail. They used to live, and they still function fairly well. All things considered.

The first human being she finds is June Dykstra, standing on the front porch of a wooden shack, looking at her tiredly through thin brown hair. It seems all the townsfolk are brown and grey, faded like an old photograph left too long in the sun, the kind where the faces have altogether burned away, leaving only the barest hollow outline of the people they used to represent. Her stare is wordless.
Mary-Ann dips her head. "Good morning, June."

"Morning, Mary." The other's voice like the whisper of the wind, toneless and worn. "You looking for something?"
"You know my–" Her voice catches on the words, as it always does. "You know my man's gone out west to look for greener lands. And he's been gone so long – if you got work I could do, June, I know you can sew and wash and clean plenty but I can farm, too, build – if you got something that needs doing."

She doesn't know why she says 'build.' Nothing ever gets built on Dust, just like nothing ever gets torn down. Things are like they are.
"I would be very grateful," she finishes, eventually, softly.

June still doesn't quite move, doesn't quite blink, her eyes two pits of darkness in leathery weathered skin. She bites her lip hard enough that Mary-Ann sees dark liquid well under her teeth, looks away suddenly, sighs a jerky mechanical sigh. "I can't give you anything, Mary-Ann. Not today."
Mary-Ann keeps walking. Neither of them say good-bye. It'd be a waste of breath, and they have so little breath left these days.

"Hello, Eliza."
"Morning, Mary," says Eliza Rogers, skin dark and hair darker, without even needing to turn around. They all know how these things go, every time, every day.

There is a long still moment where neither of them speak at all, and then Eliza turns, with an empty precision brought of habit, to look at her. "Looking for something?"
The two of them are standing on an empty road, heading in opposite directions, nothing moving in the dirty shimmering heat but a few other footsore wanderers going from building to building on their own every-day paths. The constant white-noise whine of the wind refracts off sheet metal and stone, vibrating through the constant dirty haze in the air.

"Work, if you have it," says Mary-Ann, or something like that. The details don't matter and they never have. "Anything, if you can give it. With my husband gone – you know they're waiting for me at home – you know."

Eliza looks away, brown eyes dragging across the sandy ground, and her fists clench tight around her bag as she shakes her head, ever so slightly. Then her eyes are closed, and she's speaking – "I'm sorry, Mary. We don't have any more than yours. It's been – since David went mad – it's been hard, he won't talk to me, he'll barely eat anything, and he's always been sickly – "

Mary-Ann doesn't move – (a waste of breath) – instead she listens to the unrelenting drum-beat of her pulse in her ears, and lets the uncaring pin her down and lock her in.
"The twins caught the dust pneumonia in the night," Eliza blurts, as if it's been dragged out of her, her eyes wide and anguished as the words escape. "Woke up and they wouldn't stop coughing, wouldn't get out of bed, I'm scared for – Mary, I don't want to be *alone.*"

Mary-Ann knows this already, knows this already every day, and she listens anyway. And then Eliza takes a gasping breath and her spine straightens and her voice fades again into the murmur of the wind.
"I can't give you anything, Mary-Ann – not this day."

Mary-Ann nods, and keeps walking.
The funny thing, the thing she can never help but notice, is that despite the pain in her voice, Eliza never looks the slightest bit sad. She doesn't even look afraid. She looks like nothing at all.

Mary-Ann supposes she must know the trick of not remembering very well, by now. They all do.

The building seems huge to her, constructed of a white stone that under the dirt of decades will once have been beautiful – a material that must have been shipped over more distance and burnt more money along the way than she can conceive of; the door, too, is huge, and when she knocks it reverberates and magnifies the sound no matter how quiet she tries to be.

She shivers, slightly, blankly, and goes still; settling in for the long wait.
At length the door cracks open and he peers through; the town's pastor, dark-clothed and pale-skinned and ancient, a reasonable facsimile of a smile on his face. Smiling at *her*, fingers rough where they grip the door.

She has to speak; every day, she must.
"Father," she whispers, and bows her head.

"Bless you, child," he answers magnanimously, and extends one wrinkled hand to pull up her chin, forcing her to look at him. "What is it that troubles you?"
She swallows back the familiar nausea, tries to speak, her voice cracking just a little in her too-dry throat. "Father, I am looking for a job – if there is anything to be done in the church – I could sew for you, clean, I could –" but of course it isn't true. She closes her eyes. "Father, I beg charity, I need – you know my husband went to the West, and in his absence we starve. I plead your mercy, Father, as the Scripture tells us; I plead for your mercy."

His voice is kindly, but there is no trace of sympathy in it. "Oh, Mary."
She feels it begin to rise in her throat: the shame, the hatred, the horror, and squeezes her eyes shut tighter.

“I am sorry. I know that you mean well, I know that you try to be faithful, but things are more complex than they first appear, my child. I have spoken to you of your immortal soul?”
She nods, mutely.

“There is no work to be done today, I am afraid. And to give you something for nothing, only because I pity you, my child, it tarnishes your heart and weakens your will; as much as I wish I could help you, Mary, it would be tantamount to abetting you in the deadly sin of sloth. I would be condemning your soul to burn in hell until kingdom come and beyond – you understand that I cannot do that, my child? I *care* about you, Mary.”
She is numb, her spine burning, her heartbeat suffocated silent. “Father, I – my child, they wait for me, they will starve if I cannot bring them something – Father, *please,* I need it, I need *something*– “

He interrupts her casually, habitually. “First you ask, and then you demand? Go home, my child, and try to remember your humility, your kindness. I have helped you as I can.”
So she–

So she swallows the agony down – thanks him politely, whines in the dirt and shows her belly like the bitch-dog begging for scraps that she is, and as she walks away the white noise of the wind is nearly loud enough to wipe away thought entirely.
This is the way things are, and the way they will always be, every day.

Eventually, somebody gives her something. Eventually, somebody always does. The details don’t matter, and neither does anything else. She clutches her bag to her chest, holding on to the loaf of bread it contains like a lifeline, and she walks.
What happens then – the *difference,* the butterfly’s wing that brings the storm – it is so small. That is what she will remember, later. It is so very, very small. Such a little thing, to cause an apocalypse.

Something catches her eye. That is all.
She turns, the air sepia-tone and rough, the world still. The edge of a frown wanders over her face, a hint of confusion, too deep in silence to process what she’s seeing; a void, a space where something should be, a flash of rare darkness chasing itself through the air. It’s a – oh, she knows what it is, she used to always have known, and she’s – has she forgotten something?

There’s something strange and painful at the base of her spine, a conflict of interest clashing in her blood, ideas and shapeless not-ideas chasing each other round her head until she loses track of the world entirely. A –
Shadow. It’s a shadow. Only a shadow.

She nearly laughs, a distant mechanical giggle bubbling and boiling in her lungs, covers her mouth with her hand instead. Nothing more than that. Shakes her head free of red salt and darkness, settling back into the pattern of things already. Which is when it happens; which is when she glances absently down and for the first time *sees.*
The fact of it is this: she does not have a shadow.

None.
Mary-Ann doesn’t understand, cannot understand. She stumbles and twists, staring dumbstruck at the ground below – but the saffron-orange sunlight beats down hard and

unbroken on the ancient black asphalt of the road, no trace or trail or darkness left behind.

She cannot seem to – think. She has spent so long purposely and frantically refusing sentience, a desperate attempt to survive the banality of the horror around her, that now when presented with something that *demands* inquiry, demands reason, demands her to think of it and assign it meaning, she cannot seem to function at all. The static roars behind her eyes.
She makes an awful, aborted noise, a whine of pain and animal confusion, and continues the only way she knows how: she keeps walking.

She sees Eliza again, along the way, and June standing silent on her porch, and too many other worn-away people. They don't have shadows. They don't seem to notice. She registers, somehow, that every day they don't, and every day none of them notice, least of all her, and she cannot understand how it's possible – and the incomprehensible inconceivable terror rises in her throat and burns in her skull and she can't, she must, she keeps moving.
They do not look at her as she passes.

Out of town and out into the desert and she does not stop – realises only that the shape on the horizon is her own house when she sees her child waiting for her curled-up on the front step. As they wait every day. She can see them, staring into the distance until she appears, hour after hour in the sun (the sunlight through which she still casts no darkness on the ground.) She can't think about that. It is not that she doesn't want to. It is that she can't.
They smile a wide heartbreaking smile as she comes closer, and finally they jump up and they run into her skirts, grasping her hand tightly in theirs. She blinks dimly, tries to clear her head and fails, stumbles but stays upright. It's not their words that awake her, in the end, or their face, but the sight of them on the shadowless ground – awareness snaps and burns in her throat, and then she is crouching down, a desperate hand clutching in the sand at their feet. *No*, they can't. They have, her child *does* have a shadow, they are safe still, they are real. She sinks to the ground, breath short, wraps her arms around them and wishes she never had to let go.

"Mother?" she hears, and then a half-frightened "Are you alright?"

She shakes her head, coughs, tries to smile. "No, I'm – I'm sorry, love. Everything's just fine. I missed you, that's all."

"The chickens laid four whole eggs today," they whisper anxiously into her ear. "That's one for each of us, for supper *and* for breakfast. Right?"
She takes a jagged breath. They're trying to cheer her up, and it's working, in a certain sense, in that it makes her love for them surge so high and sharp-edged she might just crumble in the wind. They're alright. She is broken, somehow, lost, *wrong,* but they will be alright. If she can keep the same thing from happening to them.

The thought calcifies out of the dust, sudden and hard. She cannot let them stay here, in this barren sunburned land; they deserve better than these repetitive rhythmless awful days.
Her head rises, slowly, to stare at the horizon.

She knows exactly which direction it was; she remembers seeing his shape disappear in the shimmering heat at the edge of the visible world, remembers screaming his name as she runs. She remembers being too slow. She watches the sun sink down in the West, and she knows.

She puts her child to bed. She doesn't tell them she's going anywhere, answers their worried inquiries only with kisses and soft empty comforts, but her hands tremble with the effort of moving and the effort of staying still.

Something sharp and ancient roils in the dark at the back of her head, where the memories go, and drives her on. Into the red-tinted moonlight, into the dust that is as choking by night as by day, into the cold of the desert night.
She has to find a way out. A path that will take them away from this long-dead town. She'll be back by morning. She has to be.

In some sense, perhaps, she always knew what she was going to find.

There is a rhythm to it, walking in the empty plains. It's a song, a story, a state of mind, or rather a *lack* of those things, to melt into the void and thus survive it. It's simple: think nothing, say nothing, and never never stop.

Her house recedes and disappears behind her, and then there is only Mary-Ann and the Dust.

She begins to lose track of time.

Every step the same as the last. Every pace of dirt and dead grass functionally identical to the one before – not even *exactly* identical, because it doesn't need to be, only just similar enough that it becomes horrifying. It is not the Dust itself; it's the fact that it continues day after day after *day,* the repetition, the banality, the pointlessness of it, that is awful. She loses the ability to distinguish between one step and the next, past and future, here and there. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say she is no longer capable of *caring.*
Distance and memory become irrelevant. Reality ceasing to matter, and therefore to exist.

Mary-Ann cannot understand this, cannot know this. And yet.
Dust never changes. Without change, time becomes meaningless; if it's impossible to tell whether time is passing, is it passing at all? Would it make a difference either way? Would it matter? They call ultimate thermodynamic equilibrium, the lack of any physical change at all, heat death. What about the lack of any *meaningful* change?

She walks, keeps walking, mindless, thinking of nothing at all. And yet when she sees a shape on the horizon – a structure, a building, a home – on some level she already knows.
She draws closer, and its contours become clear, outlined in red-tainted silver against the obsidian sky.

And she walks up the steps of the front porch and through the door still half-open and through the kitchen and stares down at the sleeping body of her child, in her house, on

their farm, and it takes everything she has not to sob.
It'd be a waste of breath, anyway.

She tries again; sets out into the desert, her calves pulsing with familiar pain, making sure to keep the moon behind her this time. She thinks she makes it farther, before she finds the point where space turns in on itself, the snake eating its own tail, before her blood turns to sand and her heart to stone and her mind to the static-laced wind; before she comes to her own house again.
She tries a third time. This time she doesn't make it nearly so far.

Morning. Maybe. Her head spins, her throat scorched dry, but at some point the sun has risen behind her, the beginnings of the brutal daytime heat smouldering in the ground already. She needs to go home – her child will be waking, will be waiting for her. She can't remember which direction *home* is in, but it's not, she thinks crazedly, like it matters.
There is less subtlety to the change this time. Her stasis is interrupted, abruptly, when something under her feet in the desert dust *moves.*

It sends her flying forward, turning automatically as she falls, catching a half-formed impression of something sharp and yellow-white and (cold?) the sun smouldering in the sky above; she flails, her thoughts a formless tangle of fear and memory, and then she's on the ground and staring it in the face.
She makes a sound – a dislocated cut-short scream, scrabbling backwards before she can think about it – and then freezes, forcing herself to be still, forcing herself to breathe. It isn't alive. It isn't moving. Her eyes track the shape of it, over and over again, gleaming whorls of clean yellow bone and eye sockets so deep and so dark they seem to exert their own gravity – pulling her in.

It's a skull. Only a skull. Not even a human one.
She reaches out to touch it with trembling fingers, expecting that intoxicating contradictory cold she'd felt momentarily under her feet, but now she finds it warm against her skin. Not the sun-baked heat of the ground around it, but something entirely more intimate; a dark sticky reddish warmth that pulses, ever so slightly, under her fingertips.

It's a skull, but it's more than just that. She knows this without knowing how, recognition without memory, a deep sick fascination buzzing bitter on her tongue. It's symbolism and horror and *wrongness,* a palpable impossibility just under the surface – and despite that, *because* of it, it feels more real than anything she's seen in years. It means something. It may be dead, but it's considerably more alive than she is.
There are things at war again inside her head, memories choking on the dust. She lifts the mask to her face with slow dreamlike ease, its pulse beating a heady hungry drumbeat against her skin, and opens her eyes.

There's a figure standing in front of her.
She yelps, muffled, startled; the mask doesn't drop from her face even as her hands fly away. Flails for some kind of weapon and comes up with nothing but a dawning horror

that a weapon'd be the first thing she reaches for and freezes instead, as a compromise. Takes a painful breath. "Who are you?"

The figure turns slow and even to look at her – and it's wearing an identical mask, hair spilling out from under the bone and across the red-and-black cloak it wears. Distantly but sharply, she registers that it has a shadow, clear and well-defined and holding a massive deadly-looking javelin that the figure itself is quite distinctly not carrying. And then she meets its eyes, and all the breath leaves her like a knife down her throat; the blue-bright eyes behind the eye sockets are unmistakably and definitely hers.
Something at the back of her head supplies the answer: *You*. And then a name she knows and doesn't remember: *Cousin Persephone*.

"I don't understand," she rasps, the sand coating her tongue.
It – she cocks her head at her, at herself, and she recognises the shape in front of her for what it is; a metaphor only, a symbol walking abroad, an independent being but not a whole one. A hallucination of who she used to be. The response makes its way through her subconscious and flares bright in the sunlight and burns bright into a realization best rendered into words as: *You wouldn't*.

Her name is Cousin Persephone of the Faction Paradox, and she never grew up at all.
She was born a thousand years ago in a history long since swallowed by the hungry things at the ragged edges of reality; her past warped and re-warped until she was exactly the person she needed to be, for this mission, and then her memory replaced again with an entirely different fiction, of a town without walls. Of blue skies and green grass. Of a husband, whom she loved, and who she realises only now she never knew the name of.

The image in the skull-mask doesn't tell Mary-Ann this, or not exactly. It's not a *conversation*, nor really communication at all – rather, Mary-Ann asks questions, and her own memories answer. Words and concepts struggling out of the stifling dark with a desperation that leaves her breathless and reeling, and Persephone does nothing but watch.
She does nothing but watch. They are two incompatible halves of a being coming into contact again, and for moments at a time she cannot keep track of the line between them, her shadow flickering on the ground at their feet. *Whose* shadow is it? Which of them is the original? She –

Mary-Ann feels that she might disintegrate. Bites her lip until she tastes blood, raw biodata an offering on her tongue. "I don't–" she chokes, and then "*Why*?"
Persephone stares at her for another long moment, and then looks away.

The oldest quantum puzzle, Mary-Ann thinks; if a tree falls in the forest, and nobody is there to hear it, does it really fall at all? She coughs, spits blood onto the dust, wipes her mouth with the back of a hand. "I don't understand."
Except she does. Except she knows. This is what the Cousin tells her, inside her head: reality has ceased to matter, and thereby to exist. Ultimate thermodynamic equilibrium is heat death; Dust has been overtaken by what can be only be called the death of meaning.

Every day is indistinguishable from any other, without quite being identical, and vitally every *possible* day is the same. Physical reality survives, inexorably ticking onwards like abandoned clockwork slowly running down, but it no longer has a heart, or a shadow, or a soul. If a tree falls in the forest and no one cares, it might as well have not fallen at all.

Do you see, now?
"Why are–" The words come slow and hit hard, outlined clear and brittle-bright as glass inside her head. She feels remarkably calm. "The Faction. They did this?

Yes. No. The figure in the skull-mask hisses in frustration. They set this trap. They sent her into flux-state, it's just that all the states are ultimately the same thing.
"You're a Shift?"

– the words running away from her, and she knows for a horrible moment what she was before Dust, remembers the mission, remembers the preparation – the symbol and metaphor that were her power surgically and brutally removed, the remnants of her consciousness hidden in the dark of her subconscious where the wild things go. The answer is *no,* but *almost.*
Torn apart and all that's left a dream of a memory of a concept of what once was: Cousin Persephone, a hallucination hiding in her own gutted mind.

Mary-Ann isn't real. She has never been. She sucks in a breath and waits for the shock to hit, and it doesn't come, and that more than anything else leaves her breathless. On some fundamental level, it's not a *surprise.*
(At least, she supposes, it explains why thinking *hurts* the way it does. She was never meant to have to think. She lost her mind when she lost her meaning.)

And the Cousin-hallucination has advanced, close enough to touch, blue eyes urgent. Mary-Ann is not alone. Dead time occurs naturally, but it can't sustain itself, the slightest of outside influences enough for change to take hold again and bring it all crashing down, unless some higher power decides to protect it – and there's only one force that wastes its time with the complete lack of any temporal energy. The strangers, the obsessives, who view the death of meaning as equal parts refuge and temple, offerings to the founder they worship.
This is *vital.* Mary-Ann shuts her eyes tight and cannot prevent the words from escaping, gasping for air, spinning out of control. Yet her voice, when it comes, is calm, level, cutting. "This is nechronomancer territory."

She's fallen to hands and knees, fingers curling in the dirt. She opens burning eyes, blinks furiously at the fuzzy scarlet of the horizon, the Cousin's silver-and-leather boots pacing back-and-forth in front of her, beating out a tense trapped helpless rhythm. "Why are we here?" she breathes. "What was the mission?"
A hundred fractured divergent responses layered on top of each other hit all at once. To wait. To watch. To trace. To lead. To bait. To keep the Peace. To keep the order intact.

Order – sick laughter rises in her throat. Order, and Faction Paradox.
It goes against the grain for their kind, she'll admit – and it's her own voice – her own voice crystallizing eerily clear and entirely unreal in her head. But it's Peace-time now. Times have changed.

She staggers upright, again, the crimson sun too bright in her failing eyes. Her child, she remembers dimly. Her child is waiting for her, at the other end of the meaningless self-referential distance to *home,* through the heat and the hate and the Dust. She has to get back to them. It is nearly time to head to town again, as she does every day, the relentless repetition dragging her on.
"Doesn't feel like Peace to me," she bites out, and then she is moving.

They are crying, when she arrives. They'd dressed themself and combed their hair and set the table and when she still did not come they must have just collapsed; sniffling in the door-way, tears soaking into the parched crumbling wood. She's barely a few metres away when they finally look up, and she sees their face go white as they freeze, a muffled sound not quite escaping their mouth, staring at –
The mask. She's still wearing the mask. She tears it off, feels the loss immediately as the dust no longer filtered by sharp teeth and symbolism floods back into her lungs, tries to shake it off. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, I'm– I'm so sorry – I should have come sooner – "

The pause is too long, and their voice too thin. "M– Mother?"
"It's me," she says, and it's true, it has to be – "It's me, I'm sorry I was gone so long–"

Their eyes track her every movement, twitchy, wary, and the suspicion *hurts.* She doesn't dare move closer, cannot look away. "Why were you wearing a mask, Mother?"
"It isn't important," she says, whines, pleads. "I swear, it doesn't matter, I'm not – I won't – I won't leave you again, I promise."

They hesitate for a moment longer, their eyes unreadable, hands twisted tight in the long loose ends of their hair. And then something snaps, and they run into her arms, and for a pure split-second moment things could be alright again.

She pulls up water from the well, finds her bag and her hat, and she walks to town.

She could not explain why. She could not even think of it. Though it *does* seem strange now, to walk the every-day while knowing why it's here, to learn the nature of her existence and continue on regardless. Somehow, it scares her.
The trouble is that she can't think of anything *else* to do.

No sense in staying here and no sense in trying again to escape and in the end they still have to eat, don't they? She *thinks* they still have to eat. And it's not as though any of it matters. She walks.
At the back of her head, behind the mask, a thing once called Persephone buzzes and beats at the bars of its cage.

"Hello, June."
June stares at her from the front porch, her face still a photograph from a long-gone childhood, eyes long since worn away by time. Mary-Ann shivers, a little. She wishes she could fade into the pattern, wishes she didn't have to think, wishes.

"Morning," she repeats, anyway.
"Good morning, Mary." The other woman blinks, not quite looking at her. "You looking for something."

Mary-Ann tries to speak and chokes, words the wrong shape for her mouth, roughshod and razor-edged – her lips and her throat and her tongue bleeding crimson, cut to ribbons by too many words said *every day,* a mortal wound that had never *meant* anything and thereby had never been real until today.
No. That's nonsense. She closes her eyes. "Food. Work. Anything you can spare."

There's something in the other woman's worn-down eyes that she can't identify. A hunger.
"I can't give you nothing," June says slowly, syllable by jerky syllable. "Mary. Not today."

"Eliza," she says.

"Good morning, Mary."
"Are you alright?"

The other woman freezes halfway through her turn; wide white eyes wheeling around to focus on Mary-Ann with a deep uncomprehending kind of shock. The hunger is more distinct now, a wanting, something trapped very very far down. She still has no shadow. Mary-Ann takes an automatic shuddering step back, and a part of her wonders if it's always been like this and she never noticed; which of them has really changed.
"Mary?" Eliza grinds out, too slow. "You looking for something?"

"No," she says, and finds suddenly that it is true. "Are the twins any better?"
"Better?" Eliza repeats, and again – hysterical. "Better?"

The townswoman is staring at the ground, at Mary-Ann's feet, and Mary-Ann follows her gaze automatically (if only in an attempt to get those eyes out of her head) and nearly jumps out of her skin when she finds a shadow there; shimmering faint and fuzzy on the ground, but there nonetheless. A shadow, her shadow, hovering below her. Dimly, she registers that it doesn't move when she does, stares at her with a desperate stubborn fury instead. It's carrying a javelin.
She hears Eliza speak, again, voice cracking in ways it shouldn't. "I can't give you anything, Mary-Ann – I can't– "

Mary-Ann looks up, the taste of blood and salt vivid and visceral on her tongue, blinks. It's her cue to walk away. She shouldn't. She does.

She finds herself in front of the church too soon.

It all happens the same way. The same way it does every day. She asks, and he touches her, and spouts stupid meaningless patter, and refuses; and she begs and he calls her arrogant –
as if she were a child; and perhaps she is a child, they were all created to learn, but she is a starving one. She thinks perhaps this is what drove her mad, what left her unable to find the meaning in anything. Not the cruelty of it, but the repetitiveness, the *stupidity* of it. Her eyes burn and still she – still.

"I need it," she repeats, tonelessly.
He clicks his tongue at her, begins already to close the door. "First you ask, and then you demand? Go home, my child, and try to remember your humility, your kindness. I have helped you as I can."

It occurs to her that she is not the only one who comes here; that there are so many others hungry, that this charade must happen so many times a day. That he tells all of them the same nonsense, the same self-important garbage. That all of them are trapped as she is, that all of them must listen and walk away with the shame too heavy on their backs – shame they don't deserve, shame they don't understand, shame they must drag through

the dirt nonetheless. Every day. Every day. Every *miserable* fucking day. She snaps.
"No."

The pastor stares at her quizzically, understanding nothing. "What…did you say?"
"No," she says, shadow darkening beneath her feet, and it's Cousin Persephone's words now on her tongue, Cousin Persephone's furious ironic imperial swagger that drives her glare. (Cousin Persephone's two-metre javelin almost there in her hand.) "I won't do it," she explains softly, words biting into the dusty air with savage glee. "I won't thank you. Not anymore. Not ever."

He sputters; not like a man insulted, but like gears grinding against each other, like sandpaper and rust.
"I don't mean to say that you *must* give what you have, certainly not that I'd take it from you," she continues, perfectly calm, hate a controlled glorious burn under her skin. "Although one might argue it's a *moral* responsibility. Not that you care. All I demand – and I *do* demand – is that you stop *pretending* you do."

Oh, she hates him. This is emotion, then, this fire and ice. This is what feeling feels like. She thinks she likes it.
"You could at least be *honest* about it," she snaps, advancing still – he doesn't react, still staring at her with broken-clockwork eyes, and she feels the dust and the stillness around her start to shudder. "You could at least *admit* to yourself that you don't care about anyone else but you, could at least stop hiding between some idiot rationale the Scripture never contained, could stop acting as if you *knew better*– "

Something's wrong. Something's wrong. She snarls and kicks the other half of herself back (which one is it, now? Persephone or Mary-Ann?) and rages on.
"Because you do that very well, don't you? Maybe it's the only thing you *can* do. Make other people feel like they're not worth the air they breathe. Do you *like* it? Is that why?"

She spits the words, her eyes watering, her voice splintering like old dead wood.
"The Dust hurts and the starvation kills and th– the– but you, you, *you,*" a mad ceaseless repetition, the wind roaring ever louder in her ears, "you're what made it unbearable, you sanctimonious *bastard.*"

Everything falls apart, all at once.

White. And then dark.

"Here," he says. "For you." Blinks up at her with milky eyes. "Th– there wasn't much left. I'm sorry. Had to make it be enough for everyone."
She takes the package automatically, and then a step back, staring at him with a peculiar dislocated confusion. "Father?"

He bobs his head, mumbles "Bless you, Mary-Ann," and closes the door.
The package. Wide eyes wheel downwards, and she already knows – can feel the smaller individual packages inside, corn and beans and dried meat. Food. Enough for the day, enough for several days if need be – as it is every day.

As it is. Her eyes narrow. Every day.
She stuffs it into her bag and starts moving, the faint outline of a shadow still following her, ignoring the dead hungry eyes of the townsfolk as they track her down the street. Her heart beats too fast. She remembers – he collects what the town has to spare, gives it to those in need, and it is never quite enough but they survive, and he does every day – except that she shouldn't, except that something just went very wrong.

"Persephone," she whispers, glancing back with wary eyes.
Dead time, the Cousin supplies in her head, bitter but fast. The butterfly's wing that brings the storm. The stasis can never stay intact for long –

She changed things too much. Twisted the dead-time too far. Collapsed the entropy entirely. It self-stabilised – some protocol left behind by the nechronomancer – reconfigured, must have, but that won't last. She has a shadow, and she has meaning, and she is changing, and soon it will all come crashing down.
It is then that she hits the perimeter, the low jumble of iron and old wood that marks the edge of town, and it is then that she sees it.

A darkness, and more than a darkness, gathering at the western horizon; unimaginably distant in the clear scorching sky, but moving fast. Mary-Ann recognises it immediately, instinctively, something ingrained so deep-down that even the Faction couldn't have touched it: a fear so primal it could have come from Old Earth itself, ten million years hence, from the days before history when the wild things reigned. She can feel Persephone trying to justify it: a cultural construct, the ultimate collapse of the dead time filtered through their feeble frame of reference. It doesn't matter. She knows.
There's a dust storm coming.

She blinks slowly, shadows still flickering in the corners of her eyes.
(Why is she still here?)

"Persephone," she whispers, again, feels the shadow of a skull overlaid over her face – it's all symbol, anyway. She has spent so long incapable of questions. Perhaps she forgot what answers were like. "What was the mission? What – Order were we to keep?"
This time, the response is simple.

She doesn't know.
And then a weary elaboration – there's the thing about being able to hack a person's biodata, after all. You don't need to *tell* them their purpose for them to carry it out. It's perfectly logical. A Cousin who has been told their mission could run, or rebel, or fuck up, or bring it down in a hundred other myriad ways. A Cousin who has been changed, conditioned, past and future, to be the exact kind of person who would follow the purpose *anyway* – whose natural response to any given situation would be exactly the response you want them to make, whether that be lie or truth, aggression or diplomacy, order or chaos, life or death – they cannot. They become incapable of not succeeding; any outcome that results from their actions must by definition be victory, by the very fact of their creation.

Or at least, they can't *tell* whether they've succeeded or not. Which comes out to the same thing.
They needn't even ever know they were changed.

She blinks, once. The third part to the answer comes slowly, short and jerky and bitter: *It doesn't matter.* It doesn't matter whether she knows or not, because the Faction will always have known more. She will carry out her purpose; that much she can be certain of. She

has no kind of choice.
Free will has abruptly ceased to become a concern.

She bites it back, tears her eyes away from the coming storm, and keeps walking.

Her child is quiet, when she returns. They eat what the pastor gave her with a muted meticulous kind of joy, wary, like they're afraid it'll disappear if they move too fast; settle down to stare at her wordlessly, something almost analytical in their eyes.

She doesn't know what's wrong, why they keep their distance in the way they do, if it's fear or anger or despair. She wonders if they felt the dead time collapse and re-form, if they know something's changed, if they've noticed that she has half a shadow now. On some level she recognises that she *could* know the answer, that if she only *looked* at them she would understand, but she does not look.
She knows too many answers already.

They don't question her when she sends them to bed alone again, don't protest even as she finds her winter cloak and opens the door into the desert night; she waits until she's a good ways away from the house before she puts on her mask, but she feels that they must know, anyway. She feels almost guilty, shame smouldering sour in her gut, but she's – she's doing it for them, she must be – and anyway she needs it, in a way she cannot describe or deny. She needs the pulse of symbolism against her skin. Otherwise the return of change will destroy her as it destroys all dead things, crumbling in the force of the storm, her feeble shadow not enough to keep her from rotting when time re-starts.
No. She can't think about that either. She has a purpose, a mission. She saw shadows in the corners of her eyes.

She doesn't know what that purpose is, yet. She doesn't know if she *wants* to accomplish it. But she will.
At some point she realises that she is no longer heading West, if she ever was; instead she finds her feet tracing the old road, the same worn-away path that leads to town, but in the other direction this time. She has not walked this way in a long, long time. Most likely none of her memories of it were ever real in the first place. She is heading into the badlands.

The world becomes dreamlike here. Its unreality seems so obvious, through the clear ancient darkness of yellow eye sockets, with her moonlit shadow singing soft staticky songs of its own in her wake. Songs she cannot hear, or understand, only feel; and the alien melody reverberates in the unnatural stillness of the dead time and echoes back from planes she will never comprehend.
At length, she comes to a crossroads.

There's a fire built in the very centre, small and neat and bright, crackling merrily as she approaches; the sound drifts through the looming wind-torn rock all around and reflects back from unexpected directions, after some considerable delay, sometimes returning distorted and stretched, sometimes not at all. She sees, as she draws closer, that the fire is built not on wood but on brush, tumbleweed that could have been dead for decades – so dry and so thin, the realization slowly takes hold, that it should have flared and roared and disappeared in seconds. But it doesn't.
The flames lick at the sky in strange and tortured shapes, fluctuating but never quite changing, as trapped by the dead time as anything else. The shadows it casts seeming to claw at the ground desperately before they are subsumed into the larger darkness. The

asphalt of the road underneath bubbles and burns, the smell sharp and bitter on her tongue.

She stops some paces before the burning bush, before the tipping point where the paths meet (or diverge). She has heard enough about crossroads and campfires and turning-points to know that moving further would not be wise.
After some time, standing there, her focus shifts to one shadow in particular.

There's a long moment in which neither of them recognises what she is looking at, and then Persephone makes a strangled stifled noise of horror and recoils, suddenly, violently, with enough force that Mary-Ann feels the *crack* of impact against her rib-cage.
She knows it, then. Knows it the only way she *can* know it, the shape made of darkness, outlined in crossroads firelight.

Hello, Mary-Ann, says what she can only call the Devil, and its smile is rust and smoke and need.
It's in her head. This much she is certain of. She can feel it, oily and thick and numb, coiling in the dark corners of her mind, shadows flickering in the corners of her eyes. It's not truly there any more than Persephone was. It's not humanoid – at least, she couldn't with any confidence call it such – but she couldn't call it anything else, either, not really. It's not so much that it's indistinct or ever-shifting (though it is) than that she simply can't quite seem to *look* at it.

The air distorts, heat-wave-warped through the flash and snap of flame. Her sight slips out of focus. For an instant every time she blinks, it's all gone, the crossroads, the fire, the shadow – as if it was never there, because of course it isn't. This is *all* in her head. Not that it matters.
It does not do to be impolite to deities, whatever their allegiances. She wets her lips. "Good evening."

The Devil regards her with eyes that are not eyes. *Do you know me, Mary-Ann?*
"I – think I am beginning to."

Its voice is a rattle and a hum and the smell of gasoline; there is more than she can identify hidden behind that glittering knife-wound of a smile. *Not a coincidence, then. No random series of events. Things are shifting, Mary-Ann, aren't they?*
"It's Peace-time now," she hears herself say, the echo in her head more distorted than any improbable badland refraction could ever be. "Times have changed."

Peace, it repeats softly. There's the implication of amusement, of hate. *So they say. What does that mean, Mary-Ann? Do you know? Have you ever known?*
"I – th – e Book," and she cuts off hard, wills herself and the Cousin under her skin silent. "What will you give me, for that information?"

The Devil's smile flicker-flashes upward, suddenly, instantly, to focus on her. *Oh. Oh dear, Cousin. Is this a bargain, that you're offering?*
"Don't play with me," she whispers. Her fingers white, her mask faceless. It's toying with her. "There's always a bargain. I know that well enough. There's no leaving the crossroads until the decision has been made."

What would you give me, it whispers, *for your freedom?*
She doesn't answer.

A way out, Mary-Ann. Of everything.
"…West."

West, it agrees, smiling still. *Not all your planet is changeless. Not all the desolation is dead. Away from the stillness, the Faction Paradox, the War.*
"The Peace," she corrects, automatic. (The trace in her head leads back: the Book is)

Its edges become, if anything, sharper. *Whichever you like.*
She tries to think – her eyes darting back-and-forth behind the mask, breath short. Tries to find Persephone, in her head, and can't; can't find the line between them at all, the divide gone or drowned in razor-blade shadow. There is only the Devil and the deal it offers. "What would it cost me?"

It's a very nice mask you have, it rasps, idle, alien. *Wouldn't you say? There's some considerable amount of symbol in that. Some considerable amount of impossibility.* There's hunger in its hiss, no longer quite held back by the knife-blade of its smile. Its edges thin and ragged and wounded in the wind.
The hunger is familiar. She's seen it before, in the dead eyes of the townsfolk, that locked-away wanting – but this is a thousand times that, and a thousand times older, an ancient agonizing *need* that has been hidden for longer than she could ever conceive of. That could swallow Dust whole and still be starving.

That, it says, *that I could be interested in.*
She chokes on air. She – (couldn't, wants, must, *Persephone)* –

For the West, Mary-Ann. Would you make that bargain?
The contradiction at the heart of her *catches,* the impossibility and the wrongness and all the things she still cannot know cutting into each other and tearing her to ribbons along the way.

"I will not sell my soul," she gasps, desperate and cornered, some barrier breaking down – "not to you, not to any god or demon, not again – "
It takes her a moment to realise it is laughing. It's an awful delirious noise, glitching through the air in ways no sound ever should, and she's not sure when it started or if it could ever stop – ringing round and round her head, warping as it bounces off the rock, and the pain in that laugh is almost unimaginable. She recognises, then, that the Devil is dying.

"What do you *want?*" she bites out, the sob in her throat brutally kicked back.
Many things, it says softly, and she doesn't know when it grew but it seems huge now, looming to fill half the sky, its double-bladed smile ready to slash the moon from the firmament. *For your freedom? All you need to do is say yes.*

She hesitates. "What am I agreeing to?"
The bargain.

"What price will I pay?"
None. Only the agreement.

Her eyes narrow. "Is that the truth?"
How would you tell?

Its smile *burns,* the same awful unnatural changeless pain of the campfire below, and she has never hated anything more than that motionless mocking amusement. Except that she *can* tell, or more accurately she knows that it doesn't matter; it has given its word, and if its word means nothing than no contract she makes with it would be binding anyway.
All it wants is for her to have agreed. Nothing more. It reeks of symbolism, symbolism that she can no more pinpoint or understand than Persephone could leave footprints in

the Dust, and she loathes it with an intensity that surprises her – in some sense it feels *familiar*, the choice that is no choice at all, and she knows there's no walking away from this. Such is the nature of a crossroads.

Freedom.
She closes her eyes. "Yes."

There's a hiss and a crackle and a pop that does not echo at all, and then silence.
Only silence.

She opens her eyes slowly, expecting it already, the familiar despair at the pit of her stomach – drowning in the meaninglessness all over again, tears disappearing into the dirt and fading away before they can even wet her cheeks, that *hate* still boiling beneath her skin.
She's only metres from her own house, its shape looming grey and too-familiar in the moonlight. No sign of the badlands, of the crossroads, of the fire. Of the Devil or of its bargain.

The moon is low in the sky again, the sunrise beginning to burn on the horizon. She wonders briefly why she isn't tired, after two days and two nights without sleep, but she is no more exhausted then she always has been (every day). She supposes here are benefits, in a certain sense, to being unchangeable. The laughter sears her throat raw.
She shakes her head; none of this matters. She'll keep walking, as she always does.

She registers, as she draws closer, that her child is sitting in the door-way again, waiting for her; even then, it takes her far too long to realise what's wrong.
For a moment, nothing more than a moment, she sees them. *Really* sees them.

(How has she never looked before? Did she really care so little? Didn't she realise?)
They straighten easily as she approaches. Movements lazy and dangerous, their smile bright and brittle and mocking. Her eyes try to skitter away from their face, as they always do, terrified of what she might see if she looks, but there is too much of Persephone in her now for that to fool her. Their eyes, she registers, blood pulsing slow and heavy in her ears, are silver as the moonlight.

They don't look like her, or the husband she never had. They don't look like part of Dust. They don't even look *human.*
They are *other,* in a precise and alien way she cannot describe, and numbly she tries to remember if she has ever known their name.

It's a soft aching whisper at the back of her head: *nechronomancer.*
The nechronomancers: a counterculture in heaven, who remake themselves nameless and genderless and historyless in imitation of the old one they worship, revelling in strangeness, weaponising incomprehensibility. Warping themselves until they too are half-inconceivable. The cult of the other, of the seventh founder, who deal in spaces beyond and places unknown and histories unknowable where time ceases to mean anything at all. Persephone remembers. Mary-Ann knows.

(And here's the funny thing – she had thought that she needed them, that she loved them, that she could not survive without them. She had thought that if she lost them, it would destroy her. And she was wrong. She is still here, as she is every day, though every day the Dust is thicker and the sky darker and it hurts a little more, she is still here).
(She thought it would be too much to bear, but it's not. It's not even *close.* There is so much she can bear, so much more pain she can take and keep going, so much longer she

can survive as everything dies around her. She doesn't want to keep going. She doesn't have a choice).

"Sweetheart," she breathes; her hands outstretched, a plea as much as anything. "I'm sorry I left – please, forgive me – sweetheart –"
They blink, sigh softly; it cuts her off cleaner than any knife. Their voice is sweet and high and clear. "No. I think we've both tired of that game, by now. Haven't we, Mother?"

"I'm not your mother," she says, with a certain desperate defiance.
Their eyes are bright and inquisitive and puzzled. "Aren't you?"

Her breath hitches. They're not her child, and she knows this, but they have the same voice and the same gait and the same terrible wonderful smile that her child did. They aren't even mocking her. This is who they are, who they have always been, only she never *looked.*
"You're Faction Paradox," they decide, after a moment, all thoughtful curiosity. "Yes? A Cousin sent in undercover, a sleeper agent to breach the entropy and summon the storm. Deployed preconditioned by fact of her biodata and triggered remotely by – oh, something." Their feet are bare, the hem of the dress she (never) made for them flickering in the constant bone-weary wind, their eyes like mirrors as they stare up at her. "The question, I think, is *why*."

She swallows, her throat ragged, her tongue dry. "C– Cousin Persephone. I was Persephone."
Their eyes narrow, almost accusatory, childish frustration in their voice. "I don't *understand.* Our kind and yours were never enemies. The Faction never *used* to mind death, or chaos, or subversion of the Rationalised order." They emphasise the words, pained. "I don't understand *why*, Mother."

"It goes against the grain for us, I'll admit," she whispers, Persephone's words bitter and painful as sandpaper in her mouth. "But it's Peace-time now. Times have changed."
Their silver gaze widens, blinks once in exaggerated astonishment. "The Armistice – but why would the Faction work *with* the Peace? Why would you come alone? Why would you hide, if you're here by the Houses' behest already?" There's an anger in their words, but no anger in their voice, a contradiction in terms that tears into the base of her skull and lodges there, barbs jammed slick into the wound. "We *told* them dead time isn't a weapon. It's our *home.* There's no *reason* for the Armistice to want to destroy it. Death is a perfectly natural thing, it only happens a little differently here. Difference does not mean danger. Strangeness is not a weapon."

"That's a lie," the Cousin says, more by instinct than anything else.
Their face sours, sharpens, a glint of jagged white teeth showing for a moment through the white light that shines where their eyes should be. "Only because the Houses *think* it is."

That's not untrue, and she doesn't know how to respond to it, doesn't know to respond to the child that is not hers and that is so much older than she can try to understand. There's something about them that is by nature impossible to comprehend, undefined and thereby impossible *to* define – something that her mind doesn't quite want to accept as real, that hurts to look at, that is agony to think about. There is something about them that has long since gone mad.
In the silence, there's a rumble – so far away as to be nearly inaudible, but loud enough to travel through the ground and find its way into her bones, into the blood-circuits of her mask. She sees their eyes – so bright they're almost reflective, wide and flat and blank –

narrow slightly, as they hear it too. She pulls her gaze upwards.

The sun has half-risen behind her, staining the sky crimson and gold, but the darkness to the West remains – painted huge and ravening against the sky, sheer corrosive shadow seeping forward, and it takes her a too-long moment to remember the dust storm. It's close, now. It's coming.
"It's not fair," the nechronomancer mumbles. "It's not fair." And then they say it again, the repetition making the words meaningless, delirious and wounded and lost.

She closes her eyes. "You made this?" It's a stupid question, the words halting and slow, and it's all she has. "Y–you made the loop?"
"It's not a loop," they mutter, but there's no venom behind it; they do not turn their head. "There's no repetition. It's a different day, every time, it's just that you can't tell the difference between them."

And then this: "I loved you, Mother." They say it sadly, clearly, words coming down with an apocalyptic finality. "I waited for you. I knew you had the Faction in you – we see that sort of thing. I thought I'd monitor you from close inside, thought that I could've watched you, that I'd know when you were to strike, but you *didn't* strike. You were kind."
They are smiling, that same heartbreaking beautiful smile that has always torn her apart.

"I hoped you'd never wake up, Mother. I hoped I could watch you forever. I waited for you," her child says, closes its mirror-bright eyes, "but you never came."
It is too much. She wants – to cry, to scream, to kill, to bleed – she doesn't *know* what she wants, and that is the worst of it, because everyone *else* seems to know already. The nechronomancer, the Faction, even the Devil's bargain. There was a catch behind that deal, there must have been, there always is (it wanted the symbolism of a bargain and nothing else, but what does that *mean,* and when will it catch up to her?)

"I," she starts, and stops, her breath shuddering.
She doesn't want to serve any of them. She wants –

She wants *out.*
Freedom. (Her eyes snap open.)

"What happens if the – if the storm hits?"
They laugh at her, gaily, innocently. "Entropy fails. The stasis breaks. This town becomes a normal chunk of the planet Dust, only unchangeable in the sense that nothing ever *really* changes. Temporal energy begins to function again. You truly didn't remember much, did you?"

Her breath catches. They're –
She has it.

The Faction and the Devil and the Peace don't *matter.* She doesn't *care* what they want; they can have their incomprehensible strategies, their layered labyrinth conflicts. She wants *out.* She feels her shadow shift into combat-readiness, Persephone shrieking bloody victory at the back of her head, her javelin suddenly nearly-there in her hands and as comfortable as if it had always been – *there's* her purpose, or the only one that matters. As long as she stays out of reach until the storm hits, as long as she keeps changing enough that the dead time won't be able to catch her again, she can be free.
It is then, perhaps, that the line between Persephone and Mary-Ann finally disappears.

The nechronomancer's turned back to the storm, head bowed, waiting, and while their back is turned, while the growling thunder covers the sound of her footsteps, she begins to

run.

It is not two hours to town.

It is much less than that, or she thinks it is, but it is so hard to tell them apart; the illusion of time is slipping, as the illusion of space did, turning on itself in self-referential schizophrenic loops.
She finds no people, this time, no June at her porch – there is no attempt, today, to follow the pattern. The townsfolk have boarded themselves up into their homes, too many empty eyes visible through the slats and the cracks, the streets eerily empty; she gets the sense that they are bunkered down for the apocalypse.

Which, of course, they are. It's the end of *a* world, at least.
She knows that the nechronomancer's behind her, somewhere, can hear their wailing cry of *Mother* on the wind, but her skull fits her tightly and her shadow fits her tighter and she doesn't have to hear them anymore.

She heads deeper – into the shantytown labyrinth, jagged teeth of rust and plywood ripping open the crimson sky, old wood and sheet-metal creaking in the gritty wind. The usual omnipresent whine is climbing into a shriek now, tearing into the ground with a kind of viciousness she remembers from the beginning that never happened, that first summer when the rains didn't come, and the wind took away everything that ever mattered.
It's only when she passes the church, windows broken and boarded-up, that she realises where she is going. Where the natural gravity of the symbolism pulls her; the place where things began, and where they must end. The eye of the storm.

(*Mother, where are you, Mother* –)
(Something catches her eye. That is all.)

This is where she changed. This is where the butterfly beat its wing. A nowhere street at the edge of town, the light behind her, the wind shearing cleanly off the yellow bone of her mask. Her shadow is nearly returned to her now; the loop has almost closed. She is so very, very close.
"*Please,*" they scream, behind her – and she turns to see her child there, outlined in red and silver by the rising sun, the light burning in their windblown hair, their face a mass of mirrors and white noise. "Mother," they sob. "Don't leave, please, Mother," and they *shift* – as quick and as deadly as lightning trapped behind glass – changing tack, changing line of attack, splintering. "Do it, please only if you would *do* it, burn it down, break it all apart – if you must, but I won't *wait* again." They are advancing on her, crawling forward through the Dust. "I can't bear waiting again. *Mother.*"

They think – they think she's going to call the Armistice. She doesn't know why she's here, doesn't know why she believes in the Peace so strongly, but she knows she won't. She stares them down, the thing that was once her child, and they do not frighten her – this creature that held her trapped in less-than-a-loop for an infinity so large it, too, is meaningless, and she feels nothing at all. She doesn't even love them anymore.
She raises her javelin, and crows wordless delirious triumph to greet the storm.

(– Which is, perhaps, when she notices.)
There are shadows flickering in the corners of her eyes.

She knows enough now to recognise it, by the way it seethes and eats at the corners of her vision, at the inside of her skull. She turns in time to see it coalesce, drop its mask, in the middle of the street. The Devil, a shadow smouldering in the air before her, and laughing.
Not over yet, then. She takes a step back, automatically braces her javelin against the ground, and tries to think.

It's seen her already, but it acts out an exaggerated double-take anyway, its voice whispering close by her ear. *Hello, Mary-Ann.*
Say nothing. Give nothing away. The wind in her face, but the mask keeps her eyes clear. And then something tugging at her sleeve – her free hand goes out automatically, and she's momentarily not sure whether she wanted to drive them away or pull them close, but it doesn't matter because they're speaking. Their voice half a whimper, half a hiss, shocked. "Mother – that's – "

(She almost feels like praying. But there are no *loa* here in the absence of time, and the Lord was always out of the question.)
"That's not one of mine," the nechronomancer whispers harshly, urgently. "I didn't put that here – what *is*–"

She bites her tongue. "The Devil."
They blanch. She can hear them stop breathing, at her side, radiating first shock and then confusion and then sheer potent fear. She doesn't know *why,* knows it must mean something, that they understand something she doesn't, but she doesn't dare take her eyes off the Devil – and it twists and shimmers and laughs a manic cut-glitch laugh that skips and trembles through the air. "Not the," they stutter, horror taking root in their voice – "the Adversary of Heaven – the *Devil?*"

"Not the enemy," she snaps. "Something else."
"*How?*"

"It was trapped," she grinds out. "In the dead time. It doesn't matter."
Trapped, it agrees. The word echoes, and echoes, beyond what is logically possible, layering over and over itself until it's nothing but a pulsing howl of need and hate and hunger that writhes and eats into the wind. *Running endless empty loops with no time and no space and no way to truly die. No trace nor taste of paradox. You forgot, Mary-Ann, but I could not; I remembered, and one cannot remember and survive, yet one must change to die, and I could not change nor could I spawn it. Trapped,* it repeats, roars, and it turns on her.

Except it doesn't truly move – it flickers, like the burning bush, always dying and never quite dead. The nechronomancer cowers at her side.
Doesn't matter, Mary-Ann? the Devil raves. *It is the only thing here that matters.* You *certainly don't.*

"Stay away," she spits, but she doesn't know if she could stop them, if they came.
Have you forgotten that, too? Have you forgotten the bargain?

"The treaty," the nechronomancer hisses, terrified. "The Armistice. *That's* why you're here – some weapon – some deadly thing somebody forgot to disassemble – you're here to deactivate it and hope the Peace holds."
She – To keep the Peace. She is here to keep the Peace. A War-born creature gone rogue, starving in the utter absence of temporal energy – it sounds right, and certainly it'd be in breach of treaty by its very existence. No. Would it? Is that possible? She forces the dilemma away – she doesn't *want* to remember, she doesn't care how many pieces she's still missing. (Why undercover? Why alone? What was she supposed to tear apart?)

The nechronomancer chokes. On Dust, she thinks, dirt torn from the earth by wind and hurled into their face. “Mother, I didn’t know. It’s not mine. I didn’t know it was here – I’m sorry – “
Our deal, the Devil snarls. *Our bargain, Mary-Ann. It is now.*

“Stay away from me,” she fires back, brutal. “I found my own freedom. I am not here to judge or to destroy. I don’t *care,* do you understand?” She glances down wildly at the nechronomancer, tears herself free of them in a single vicious movement. “You can lie low. Reconstruct the dead time. Maybe the Houses won’t come back. How would I know? Why would I care? They tell me it is Peace-time. It doesn’t feel like Peace to me.”
Peace, the Devil hisses, disbelieving, furious. *Always Peace. What does that* mean? *How can there be Peace, in a world like this one? You lie to me, agent of Paradox. You attempt to deceive us.*

“It’s no *lie*. It’s the truth as they made me to see it.”
It makes a horrible hungry noise. *The bargain, Mary-Ann. Complete our bargain.*

“I found my own freedom,” she shrieks, and hopes that it is true. “Your bargain is void. I freed myself first.”
Your own freedom? It rears above her, ravening, its form disintegrating as the storm accelerates. *Your own, Mary-Ann? You have nothing of your own. I gave you your freedom, three days ago. I broke the entropy. I triggered your remembrance, Mary-Ann, I tripped the switch the Faction left, I brought the storm, by myself; all I needed of you was the raw change you still carried, and a framework to fit the frame of reference.* A manic glee. *I had both. The storm is here. And when it hits, we will both be free.*

(There were shadows flickering in the corner of her eyes. That was why she looked. That was why she saw.)

She tries to process what this means. Her frame of reference – Mary-Ann’s perception of things, rendered as awfully constant as everything else by the dead time – that’s why the bargain existed, that was the purpose behind the agreement. Mary-Ann understood the power of a deal with the Devil and thereby made it real, allowing the shadow to use it to bring about that first little change, the beat of the butterfly’s wing. No. If that was *Mary-Ann’s* frame of reference, then what is she now, the Cousin in the centre of the dead town – if she does not perceive it as the Devil anymore, then *what does she see* –

“I don’t – understand.”
You wouldn’t, it hisses, and then the storm hits the edge of town.

The Cousin (who was Mary-Ann, who was Persephone, who was a long-dead name she cut out of herself when she first gained her javelin) understands several things at once, in that moment. The first of these is that they were wrong; all of them were wrong. It’s not dust that the clouds carry. How could it be?
It’s a *rainstorm.*

It’s the West, after all, come to them. And somewhere beyond the horizon lie the salt-lakes and the sea.
Secondly: that it will destroy more than the stasis-field, when it comes. Rainstorms in barren desert mean flash floods, and though there’s nothing as literal as that happening some things will, nonetheless, be washed away by the force of time returning. Undoubtedly it’s better – *anything* would be better – than the Dust, but time isn’t a kind thing, either. That fire trapped in the tumbleweed will finally fizzle and flare and burn out.

And the Devil greets the darkness like *victory*. It hasn't realised. It doesn't know that it is already long-gone – that dead-time inertia is the only thing keeping it intact. Once the tempest hits, so will the withdrawal, and no amount of pure temporal energy will save it then. The only escape the storm brings is death.
The third thing she remembers is rather harder to define. The rainstorm is seconds away. Her shadow is solid on the ground, spear real in her hands, and she finds distantly that she *understands*. The nature of the Armistice. The true identity of the thing called the Devil. Her purpose.

It's such a small thing, in the end. She closes her eyes, but she can still hear the Devil rejoicing. And she knows that she never really found freedom at all.
Doesn't feel like Peace-time.

The Devil surviving the storm is, at this juncture, an impossibility. It is a problem without a solution. It *cannot* happen, by the very laws of existence. It is, in short, a paradox.
Her hands rise to her head. To her mask. For a moment she is motionless – her fingers frozen at the blood-seal between skull and skin, between meaning and physicality, between Mary-Ann and Persephone, a connection made seamless by biodata and contradiction (the façade superseding and replacing the truth, as it always must) – and then she finds that line that she thought had disappeared, and *pulls*.

The crack is audible even through the shriek of the wind. The sound that follows is more than audible. She *screams*, inhuman, bleak, voice doubling and diverging as she splinters, and still her fingers push through meat and blood and bone, cutting deep enough to drag out her very dreams. The pain isn't *real* – there is no trace of reality here, her hands are empty, they always have been, Persephone's mask is as hallucinatory as she herself was, there *is* nothing to pull free. It's unreality, instead, that she holds. It's the darkness behind the disguise. It takes a special kind of determination, of desperation, to tear out one's own shadow, but she doesn't have a choice.
She takes a stumbling step back. Her eyes will not focus. Her vision frays, something wet and gory in her tattered throat. It lies there shimmering in her hands – a biodata-sacrifice of the highest order, the essential paradox of her, a contradiction in terms – her heart, in the form of a javelin. Her soul, in a spear. She said she wouldn't sell it, and she supposes she was right; she is about to throw it away, instead.

Her aim is still true.
The shadow-weapon arcs forward, on a direct path to the Devil's heart, and she sees the creature half-turn to face her but it's too late to do anything more than stare, recognition and fear blooming in yawning black-hole eyes. It doesn't understand, yet, what she has done. It doesn't understand what she is sacrificing. That she is saving it. Tearing herself apart to give it enough impossibility to survive the flash-flood – freeing the Devil from dead-time Hell, at the cost of her own soul.

It doesn't understand, but it will understand, soon enough. It will have her history between its teeth, the thousand truths and thousand lies the Faction fed her now fed in turn to it, as it swallows Cousin Persephone whole. That is the truth given to her, to the gutted thing once called Mary-Ann, as she topples: she is allowed in that final moment to see the glittering trail in her own timeline, the bait placed in her biodata, leading back to the incantation that created her – to the Peace itself. The answers lie in the Book. All that remains, for the Devil, is to find it.
It can do that now. The stasis has broken. It can go. Wherever it likes.

It will find the Peace, sooner or later.
She is laid out on the ground; eyes wide, unseeing. The rain is cool, at least, against her

burning skin. She can hear the nechronomancer wail.

“Mother,” she hears, a broken grieving whisper, a sob, their small hands cold as ice on her cheeks. “Mother, wake up, it’s gone, the change is gone – I can fix everything again – I can put it back the way it was – they never have to find us, Mother, I’ll keep you safe.” A ragged breath, and they curl over her, swaying back and forth. “I promise.”
Her eyes slide closed.

And then she dies.

And then she wakes up.

In the early morning darkness, just before the sun rises.
As she always does. As she always has. She pulls herself to her feet, grit burning dully in her still-closed eyes, and thinks of nothing at all.

Her name is Mary-Ann.
Every day. Every day she wakes her child – who is shy, and fearful, and clings to her like she will disappear if they look away – and coaxes it into eating something and does her daily chores and heads to town. Where somebody will give her something. Somebody always does. They survive, that way.

And every day the dust gets a little thicker, the sky a little darker, every day she must reach a little further to find the water in the well, but every day they find a way to continue; every day is worse, and still not quite enough to kill them. Somehow, they keep on walking. If she wondered, she would wonder if this was a good thing; but she does not wonder.
There are no more shadows in the corners of her eyes.

War During Peacetime

Greg Maughan

You are surrounded by a great, white light. The light touches and is one with you. All you can hear is the light. Then, in slow-motion, the light pulls away from you in every direction. At first, your skin gently tugs after it, like a sticky plaster being slowly peeled back. Then, your silhouette begins to emerge from it. The light retreats, pulling away to the corners of your eyes. Shapes, lines begin to emerge. Your line of sight is split in two, above and below. A horizon. The light squares itself off and retreats into the distance. Where once the light was everything, now shapes and tastes are picked out. In the above, two low, glowing points far off. Light with heat. Points of sweat pin-prick out of your back and neck, making you aware again of your shape. You look down on yourself. Your hands are of flesh, above them tight-fitting machine-fabric clings to your arms. Your hands are of flesh, cradled in them is metal. Cold metal. A gun.
The wind listens. The wind screams in reply and licks at your face and neck. Dust whips at you, clinging to sweat. Your still adjusting vision assaulted by a swarm of sand.

"Hedeth? I'm here."
A voice calls out for you. Hedeth? The shape of the name brings back memories, associations. You take a deep breath and allow those memories to fill the space that you occupy. As you exhale, each of those moments is accepted and let go of. You know each of them was inextricably leading you to here, to who you are right now.

Grounded, I exhale knowing it is me.
The nanotech tingles in my fingers and at the top of my spinal column. I always feel it there, giving me shivers after a time jump. It's unpleasant, but brings comfort through familiarity.

"I'm here," I call in reply, coughing back dust and instinctively reaching to pull a synthetic neckerchief up over my mouth.
"We've arrived in the middle of a bloody dust storm! Move towards my voice."

I do as instructed, turning to my right and following the voice. In my mind, that voice is linked to a shape, a name. I practice silently making the shape from my mind with my tongue. Then, as I shuffle forward through the worsening storm an outline of a man is drawn and defined. It fits the shape my tongue traces, and aloud; "Maddox." Memories rush back, wrapped around the physical sensation of his name in my mouth. Pleased, I add, "So you made it in one piece too!"
"No thanks to you, Hedeth. What was going on back there?" He breathed heavily as he spoke, gaining and losing inches in height with each inhale and exhale.

"I was busy trying to negotiate a tactical withdrawal! We'd got the information we needed, there was nothing to be gained from standing your ground." I'd been through a lot with Maddox, but still sometimes found him hard work. He had the taut, calloused body of a blunt object. "Do you know where we are? Is this where we're supposed to be?" As I spoke, I squinted through the dust storm, taking in what details I could. I'd heard Foreman's World had changed, that war had taken its toll. But I hadn't been prepared for it to look like this.
Maddox looked up from a computer display in his hand. "I can't get a timefix on us. But our spatial positioning looks as close to target as I can calculate, without factoring in fourth dimensional data." His blaster remained strapped against his thigh, both hands required for the computer interface.

“According to this, there’s a cave formation up ahead. Come on, let’s go get some shelter until the storm passes over.”
“If it passes over,” I muttered grimly as we bowed our heads and pushed forward.

The wind howled and tumbled over us. Maddox cursed. “Remind me again why I’m so attached to corporeal form…”

Aliyya had done a lot of remembering recently. Traveling in time and space across her cerebral cortex whilst her physical body ached and sweated and stung with dust. She pieced together stories in her mind, from her youngest days when the world still seemed warm and verdant. Of course, the wastelands were anything but. Though back then, her world didn’t extend beyond her home and the street where she lived; her father’s shop, piled high with fresh produce, spoke of a world in blossom. A child couldn’t understand it came from a lab, its ersatz tang all she’d ever known. The names and the faces around her a constant, offering security and continuity. Granted, the odd family would move or disappear. But it wasn’t spoken about and they were soon forgotten. Yes, life during war time had been good to Aliyya. And she had never imagined that peace would be like this.

On the day the end was announced, her mother had wept. She wailed for hours, deep animal noises that made Aliyya feel she didn’t know this woman. Then, she stopped. Then, she cleaned and cooked and worked slowly and silently around the house, tracing an outline of her existence. She was a living ghost, waiting.
The rest of the town was the same. Life carried on, but differently. Slowly, the cracks began to appear and widen.

Aliyya wasn’t allowed to go out and play anymore. Groups of adults floated together and clung to the street corners where she had once played, the patterns of daily life breaking down.
It was nearly a week before the first window was broken, a brick through her father’s shopfront. Broken glass scattered around where it lay like a jagged aura. And then it was only days after that the soldiers arrived. Not like any she had seen before, not hers. They were the enemy. But, not like the enemy she had seen photographs of or read about. They looked, well, normal.

Tired and dirty, but normal. Boys with days of dust clinging to the backs of their necks and foreheads, boys with streak patterns down their faces where sweat had carved tributaries out of the dirt that clung to them. But they laughed and smiled and swapped sweets and cigarettes. They joked and jostled and pushed each other about, a lightness that Aliyya had not expected.
Interspersed amongst these troops she occasionally saw one of her own, bound and broken. Men she had been taught to admire from birth, looking scrawnier and younger even than the enemy. Heads down, they were jeered. The occasional stone was thrown. One man she recognised even ran out and kicked a young soldier down. He stamped and spat as the watching enemy laughed.

And then her family were told they would have to leave.
The whole town was to be cleared out. The place she had called home was someone else’s land, and they were coming back. Aliyya didn’t know when it had been theirs; she had been born there, lived on that same street her whole life, the shop her father ran had always been run by him. The idea that there was a world before her, and that world could be so different, made Aliyya giddy. She’d been brought up with stories of life before her time, but they were different. The legends of the Generation Arks, striking out into

darkness. Planetfall on Foreman's World, the founding of her people's nation. It all lead up to her life, to the life of her family and her friends. That was the end point, the way it was supposed to be.

This before hinted at a world outside of her stories.
Despite that, Aliyya had not hesitated when told they had to leave. Half an hour before she was torn permanently from the life she knew; grab what was needed and go. One small bag to sum up a life, what would you reach for?

It was without thought that Aliyya had grabbed her story books. And, best of all, a big old hardbound copy of Tales from History, handed down from her father's father, treasured and poured over.
Three weeks later, part of a caravan of people snaking their slow way through the wastelands to god knows where, she wasn't sure if she'd make the same choice if given it again. Her backpack cut welts into her shoulders and the joints in her legs felt dizzy with fatigue.

Out here, with no buildings or cover in sight for miles, the twin suns of this planet that had returned to Dust over the course of the war baked and cracked the surface of the ground. As one celestial body moved past its mid-day burn and began to move over to a cooler, afternoon position, its sister arced closer and moved into her own hottest position. At this time of year it seemed to go on for ever, and with no protection out here, Aliyya felt her shoulders bake and crack too, mirroring the ground beneath her blistering feet.
As they marched onwards, rumours and gossip of where they were heading spread throughout the line. Until, finally, almost a month into their long march, word came down from the head of the snake that their destination was in sight. They were almost there. Life during peace time was about to begin.

Reality is a fractal, the Spiral Politic twisting down and round and out in Fibonacci form. The same patterns, the same actions are repeated over and over on infinite scale. As the War in Heaven raged on, its effects splintered throughout all of time and space. Galactic conflict, planetary war, gang warfare, personal rivalries – each infected by a violent grand design.
Some were aware of the Great War for Reality and felt their conflicts were important for their standing once a decisive victor had been found. Others, more often, had no idea that they were playing out patterns hidden in the fabric of existence. They believed their cause was good, that they were righteous. No idea that the meat of their flesh was cut into, the blood in their veins drained and their skulls finally trodden into the mud in sympathetic resonance with a billion other battles, each meaning nothing if you worked your way far enough up the Spiral.

Occasionally we Lesser Beings, as they like to call us, would catch a glimpse of it. I remember hearing that's what happened at Mons, with each side taking it as an omen that they would win. Not knowing all it meant was someone else was losing in just the same way further up the chain. And that goes for both sides, in my opinion. I've been at war long enough to know there are no winners, at least not amongst us poor sods that get our hands dirty.
And I've been at war long enough to know that after a while, it doesn't matter what you're fighting for. It's the pattern, that bloody fractal again. And the generals tell us the lines have changed or that this town's taken or we've lost that planet. And they stack their forces up and count them, occasionally even declaring victory. But sooner or later someone's 'interests' are threatened and we're at it again.

That's why I took to working with the Great Houses so easily, I reckon. I'd been at war so long

I'd forgotten what I'd thought I was fighting for. This war, now! This was the cream of the crop. It sat at the top of the pile and everything else, all the blood I'd tasted and lives I'd taken, filtered down from it.
This was the War in Heaven that we'd only ever glimpsed, the Big One that decides what it's all about, anyway. Even if I was just on the edge of it, a gun for hire getting snippets of information and following my nose, I knew I was finally in a war that was worth something.

And now, it's over.
Don't ask me how we knew. It's not like paperwork was signed, a peace treaty drawn up. I've been fighting for so long, but on my grade I don't even know who The Enemy is. Hell, I'm not even sure if they really know, even after all this time.

But they've picked stuff up. It's the fractals, again. Reading the patterns in nature. Servants of the Great Houses sit at the centre of time and observe all of reality looking for footprints of The Enemy. This conceptual watch station is nothing at all like Time Traffic Control. Nor is it in any way akin to the GCHQ of the Spiral Politic. As my masters have been so fond of telling me, the true nature of reality in the higher dimensions will always be a blur to an audience that perceives only four.
But peace is spreading, and I think it's got to be reflecting something higher up the chain. From out in the field, all signs point to the Re-anchoring of the Thread as imminent. The patterns in place when that happens are important, and we're not the only people that realise that. There's always the bloody Faction!

They're the ones I've got to thank for finding myself in a cave in the middle of a sandstorm on a planet called Dust. We've been tracking them across this time sector for years now, me and Maddox, and all the trails lead here. Faction Paradox are abroad and they've been reading the patterns too.

Aliyya was small for a girl of her age. She was no longer a child, but on the cusp of womanhood she still felt sleight. Back home, she had just started to burn around the cheeks when others looked through or over her. But in the camp, she had learnt, her light footprints and opaque body were an advantage.

She would dart from corner to corner, marking out patterns in the dust as she explored the make-shift streets and watched the comings and goings in this new place.
She still thought of it as a camp, couldn't think of it as home. A camp was temporary, transitory. Soon, she felt, they would find themselves home again. Part of her was waiting to go back, but the larger part knew that was not going to happen and that whatever home she might have in the future would not be the one that she once had.

"Look out, girl." A rough voice coming from a man wheeling a loaded pallet precariously close to her pulled Aliyya from her reveries and she darted again, across the market space she had stood on the edge of.
It hadn't taken long for the market to crop up. Even when her people were walking out across the wastelands, no destination in sight, men had walked up and down the great line, bent double from carrying their stock on their backs, selling or bartering. When they had arrived at the camp, the first semi-permanent structures, made of pallet boards and stacked breeze blocks and corrugated iron, had been stalls of one sort or another. To a city-size population huddled under canvas, these shanty structures had towered over the land like skyscrapers.

Gradually, some pattern of life began to emerge. People would gravitate towards the

market, haggle, argue, and swear at each other as they scrabbled over the necessities of daily life. Supply was short, so prices were high. Yet from her vantage point, Aliyya saw a steady flow of goods coming into the camp. There was no shortage to her eyes. Though she did not know where the goods trundled in from, or how.
At the far side of the market, beneath a wide canopy shade, was her favourite corner in the camp. A bustling coffee stall sold thick, hot liquorice-tinged tar. Spreading out from the stall were over-turned barrels, each with a vinegar bottle full of white spirit standing on them. Men and women huddled round these islands, chattering away, dolloping great globs of the white spirit into their coffee and growing louder, more animate with every cup.

Aliyya would hang on in wide orbit from these islands just long enough to catch the conversation, before darting on to the next one in the archipelago of life under the cafe's canopy.
Gossip drifted over to her from one island, “I heard he gets supplies through so easily cause he’s been in their pocket all through the war.”

“Don’t talk rubbish!”
“It’s true! You mark my words, once everything settles down it’ll all come out. All that stuff about sedition and fifth columnists is true. And the worst of it is, they’ll be the ones seen as heroes!”

“Nah, that bugger’s never done anything for anyone but himself. And anyway, now it’s all over, can’t we say maybe we were wrong. Maybe they were heroes.”
“It’ll never be bloody over.”

Aliyya dropped away from the orbit of the conversation as the tight-faced speaker reddened and dashed more white spirit into his coffee cup. Around another barrel, younger faces laughed and joked, so she waited there a while.
But the warmth she observed shared by this group made her feel colder in her exclusion, so she slunk on. In a far corner of the canopy, a group caught her attention. Men and women not much older than those round the last barrel, but much more serious looking, chattered furtively.

She could only catch snippets, but what she heard intrigued her. There was talk of rituals and patterns. “Peace spreads like a fractal,” she heard one say. “It must take place before the re-anchoring.”
Aliyya dropped back so as not to be seen, as a thin, redheaded boy, seemingly the youngest of the group, stood and left. Without knowing what she was doing, she found herself following him as he moved away from the marketplace and into the tented city of the rest of the camp.

The deeper into the forest of canvas she went, the further out of sight the boy dropped. Aliyya ducked under guide ropes and pushed through grubby sheets drying out on lines between tents following fruitless attempts at handwashing in tubs. She skipped past families squatted in circles outside their temporary homes, eating together and talking, exchanging updates on who they’d located across the camp and what they were up to now.
Her quarry was long gone, so Aliyya slowed and started to take in snippets of these familial conversations. But a scream pulled her from this drift, and gave her a direction to run in again. Not far from here.

When Aliyya reached the source of the scream, a tight crowd was already jostling around it. She squeezed her way through the crowd, jostling past packed spectators until she

reached the front. When she did, she wished for a moment that she hadn't. The woman whose cry she had heard was being held upright by a man who must have been the first passer-by to hear her, a resident in the next tent perhaps. Another woman held a bottle out to her and she shakily drank from it. While beyond them lay the sight that had startled her so.
It was a body, but Aliyya could not tell of what sex. The rib cage had been hacked down its centre and stretched wide open like an abused paperback. Its entrails had been pulled out and draped across the scene. Some parts Aliyya recognised, others she could not even guess at. But each had been carved and drawn wide like butchered bunting framing a body stripped of its identity, stripped of self and put to use for some other purpose.

Across the canvas that marked off the scene was a bloody scrawl. Aliyya could no more than glance at the nameless body, but could not take her eyes away from the strange image that stood over it. A crudely drawn circle, cut into above and below by two triangles, their points facing and just touching.
The blood had pooled and dripped where whatever the killer had scrawled with first made contact, thinning to an opaque orange as the circle found its length and as the points of each triangle were completed.

It puzzled her. A life had been taken, a future. Loves and laughs and tears that could have been, snuffed out. For what? It must mean something, mustn't it?

Darkness had not abated the sandstorm but it had drained the heat from the air. Now, the flecks of cold grit that raced across the ridges of the wind would give ice-burns. Thankfully, the twin suns that this planet-sized dustbowl made its confused orbit round meant that nights were as short as the days were long and hot.

We'd made it to the cave Maddox had located not long before second sunset and, having started up a small campfire, had settled in for the night to go over what we knew and what the plan was from here.
"The Spooks sat watching over us all say we should see a massive spike in artron energy emissions in the next few days."

"It must be a seriously massive spike for them to send us to this backwater," I grumbled in reply.
"Massive enough to write this timeline off altogether, by my reckoning."

I thought about the number of different timelines that had been opened up, shut down, turned around and suddenly stopped over the course of this great war. "Must be something important in this timeline for them to want to preserve it."
"Ours is not to reason why, Hedeth. Anyway, haven't you heard the rumours? It's over. All bets are off!"

"Call me naive, but I always thought when a war was over you got to stop fighting."
We sat in stillness for a few minutes, taking in the warmth of the fire and mulling things over. Then, glancing behind myself, I saw our shadows. They were cast long and distorted by the curve of the cave wall. The flickering dance of the campfire flames was passed on to our shadow-selves making them nervously jerk back and forth.

"Did you look over the figures on Faction Paradox presence in this sector?" Maddox always preferred to stick to talking in facts. It was easy to see what appealed to him about working for the Great Houses.
"Yeah, it looks like they're converging en masse from across this Space-Time Sector."

“My guess is some kind of Ritual Activity.”
I did my best to suppress a smirk. “Maddox, whenever anyone does anything that there’s no immediate explanation for your guess is that it’s some kind of Ritual Activity.”

“You’ve known the Faction long enough to know that’s how they operate. For whatever reason, they want this timeline written off the temporal map and they’re descending on Dust to carry out a ritual that’ll release enough artron energy to do just that. For whatever reason, our friends in the Great Houses want this timeline preserved. So, we’ve got to find out what the ritual is and stop it from taking place.”
It was hard to dispute Maddox’s logic. “Ok, so what’s our next step?”

“There’s a camp a few clicks from here – it’s the only population sector for days. My guess is there’ll be plenty of Faction Paradox holed up there waiting for the big day.”
“So, first thing tomorrow then?”

“First thing tomorrow.”
We lay there in the warmth of the campfire. Maddox flicked an off switch on himself and slept a still, dreamless sleep. I heard the fire crackle and the cave mouth whistle and slowly drifted into dreams of how this planet had been.

I first heard of Foreman’s World not long after I’d accepted the King’s Shilling from the Great Houses. Of course, it was never as clear-cut as that. It’s hard to explain, really. I found myself caught in a temporal conflict a few levels up from the war I’d been thrown into. Of course, up and down is of as little use as past or future when we’re talking about these things. But I found myself fighting with shadows and feeling my way around the edge of a great monolith that wasn’t there yet.
I don’t think anyone in the Great Houses has ever been impressed by anything, but they saw the way I acted and saw that I could be useful. I found myself working for a Higher Power. Odd missions here and there, just trying to smooth out the flow of a narrative that I was never fully privy to.

Over time, I got snippets of their History. Glimpses of their idea of the war. There were certainly Things That Are Very Important. Names and phrases with a weight to them, events that were an important part of the arc. The Anchoring of the Thread. The Spiral Politic, with the Houseworld at its centre.
And then there were other words and places, off from the centre and spoken with a hush.

Foreman’s World was one of these places. Something had happened here, in the early days of the war. Perhaps, even, before the first blows had been struck as the great powers shifted their pieces across reality readying themselves for the opening gambit.
It had been mentioned to me by one of my handlers. Like me, he wasn’t Houseworld Born. At that point, I wasn’t too far gone and he could see the toll the war was taking on me. Foreman’s World, I was told, was untouchable. A bolt-hole paradise that I could rest and recharge in. And back then, it was.

But as the nanotech in me took hold and I began to change, I didn’t seem to need it any longer. My skin and my spirit hardened round the edges, my aura calcified.
Now I’m back here and, despite what I was told, nothing seems to escape the war. Foreman’s World is dried up and hardened like the people that weight down its surface, like me. Foreman’s World is returned to Dust.

In the days following the discovery of the body, the atmosphere in the camp had changed. Previously, Aliyya was just starting to appreciate a new freedom. She had moved from corner to corner, just out of sight. In her old, little life everyone on her street had known her, most on that block. They'd known her as her father's daughter. Grown-ups would ask how his shop was doing and she would politely reply in imitation of the boring conversations adults would have.
Here, her whole old city's population had been jumbled up and crammed into half the space. Most of them did not know her father and none of them showed any interest in a slight girl darting along the edge of the marketplace or hanging around just in earshot of a bustling group.

Now, eyes had darkened with suspicion.
There was much talk, from what Aliyya could catch, of who the body had been before becoming that horrifying tableaux. But only snippets were muttered before she was spotted and either conversations clammed up or she was shooed away.

Aliyya was sure that the red-headed boy had something to do with what had happened, even if she did not believe he was the murderer. Harsh though it may seem, she could not imagine his narrow shoulders violently transforming a body in the way she had seen. But, nonetheless, she was convinced he was connected somehow to the killing, and to this Faction Paradox she heard whispers of.
As she danced around the edges of the camp, she looked out for him. Despite her long days, she found nothing. But, she saw others looking.

We awoke just before dawn and reached the camp not long after second sunrise. The guards around it kept their distance, it was a subtle perimeter but it was there. Once inside, it was clear to me that the line around the camp was porous. Goods flowed in where they were wanted and where men could benefit, both inside and outside the camp. Among the impression of daily life had popped up speakeasies and cafes. Children threw stones at strangers' canvas sheets and ran, laughing. Couples walked hand in hand through ramshackle lanes, still falling in love.
Maddox reached to his side and drew out his palmscreen. As he poked at it and waved it around, I noticed odd glances from faces that had not known how to trust for a long time.

"Careful with that thing," I chided.
"It's ok Hedeth, despite the medieval stench about this place we're on a Level Five here."

Maddox was an efficient soldier, but sometimes lacked subtlety. He'd had nanotech growing and changing inside him for longer than I had and sometimes I wondered if that drift away from the everyday was what awaited me. In darker moments, I wondered how much of it had already happened that I couldn't see.
"It doesn't matter if they can recognise the jist of the technology. If we're stuck in a place where it's beyond everyone else's reach, it's still going to mark us out!"

He shot me an annoyed look, then went straight back to the palmscreen. "Look, the quicker we can track Faction Paradox down, the quicker we can get off this stinking dustbowl. Anyway, I'm picking up residual Artron reading over that way." He waved his hand to the right and wandered off towards the source of the power leak.

I glanced around before following to check the lack of discretion Maddox was showing with our tech wasn't drawing too much attention. This time, the only one watching was an opaque girl, so slight I almost missed her. Nothing to worry about there, I thought, and paced on to catch up with Maddox.

Aliyya first saw the strangers a few days after the murder. Faces red with sun and carrying a week's stubble, they looked new to this environment. Their broad shoulders and full backs suggested a level of health and nourishment that none in the camp had seen for some time. They wore the plain, dusty smocks that were standard issue across the site as if they were trying to blend in. But their bearing was enough to mark them out as other, even before Aliyya spotted the small computer terminal that the taller of the two held up and poked at.
She followed them at a discreet distance, a rhythmic pulse emitted from the screen and began to speed up slightly as they crept through the camp. She heard the man with the screen murmur something about 'araton energy' or 'arton' or something.

But her steps were cut short when from out of the right edge of her field of vision appeared a thick-set, narrow-eyed man. In addition to the same dirty dull grey smock that everyone in the camp wore, a black sash marked him out.
"Where do you think you're going, girl?" He sneered the word 'girl' as if it was the foulest insult, the taste of the word like filth on his tongue.

Aliyya took a deep breath and stood straight and tall. "What business is it of yours?" she shot back at the thuggish looking man, but her shoulders and spine folded back down as she felt how high-pitched and weak her voice seemed.
Following the murder, the darkened camp had seen groups of men like this loitering on corners, their numbers swelling by the day. Aliyya didn't know whose idea it was for them to start wearing that black sash, for them to get organised. But she had not heard anyone object.

His arm lashed out towards her and the back of his hand struck hard against her small mouth. Aliyya fell back, collapsing to the floor. Her face stung and her mouth filled with the copper tang of blood.
When death came to the camp, she had been shocked and she had been frightened. During the war, death was a constant feature. But it was abstract to her. She watched the news stories, heard of the victories, was even told some of the enemy's atrocities to remind everyone how important it was to fight them. But death itself happened elsewhere.

That dead body she had seen was something different. It was hideously real and it had scared her. She had presumed that everyone else was scared too, thought that was the source of the change in atmosphere across the camp. But the man that stood above her now didn't look scared. He looked angry. The fear of others had given his cruelty freedom.
Aliyya kept her eyes locked on his, trying to read how he would next move. He took a deliberate step towards her prone form. She reached behind herself and fumbled at the ground, desperate for a rock a stick or something to defend herself with. There was nothing.

Her chest felt tight, her skull pushed inwards. She could see nothing in this man's eyes, he was cold and cruel and empty.
Her fumbling hand reached for the only thing there was – dust. She burrowed into the dry earth, barren soil pushing under her fingernails.

She saw him trigger his attack and as he dived forward, Aliyya swung her hand back up and out. Her palm full of dust and earth went flying towards his face and into those empty eyes. Blinded, he roared out and coiled his outstretched arms back in to claw dirt from his vision. As his centre of gravity and momentum changed so suddenly, he fell inches from Aliyya who was already scrambling to her feet and preparing for flight.
This camp was not a place of refuge, but a place of fear.

The space that Maddox stood in front of was crudely taped off. Its ground still clinging to the blood that had seeped into it, expressed now as a duller brown that the rest of the earth rather than the deep crimson pool that would have filled here.
He checked over the readings on his palm screen. "This is the focal point of the Artron spike. Looks like something nasty happened."

"Sorry," I called to an old man that sat in front of the tent opposite. "What happened here?"
He looked confused at us both, "Don't you know? There's been a murder. Thought we'd seen the back of that sort of thing when the war ended."

"What sort of murder," I asked. "Was there anything unusual about it?"
"Well, when I was younger, I served like everyone else. But I've never seen a body like that before. We only did what we had to do. Like I always said, it was us or them, so you do your job. And when you do a job, you don't have to like it. You just have to do it! So that's what we did, and no one can blame us for that."

"What has that got to do with this one?" Maddox barked, pointing towards the darkened earth where a body had lain.
"It was awful. I think they liked it."

Maddox held his palmscreen up to the canvas behind the scene and yanked me on the arm to look at it. "Hedeth, see the residuals on that tent?" The screen revealed markings of graffiti that had been washed away.
"That's an alchemy symbol, one step away from the Sacred Union. They're not ones for subtlety, are they?"

"It's them! We're not far off!"

As Aliyya ran, a million thoughts flashed through her mind. Snippets of panicked images she could not get a focus on. The world she was part of and the world she had thought she was part of.

Smashing against each other like breakers hitting a tidal wall, throwing foam and spray high in the air.
The First Men, making planetfall on Foreman's World after aeons crossing empty space in the generation arc. A lush paradise that had sat waiting, empty. Greeting those founding fathers with open arms.

The First Men, landing in a verdant forest, crushing leaves underfoot. The greenery burnt up by the landing party a wound to become infected.
A proud people. Family and tradition going back to the beginning of our history.

A people closed off. Fear and insecurity channelled through the past.
War for liberation. War to defend our way of life.

War by design. War to destroy the life of others.
Aliyya had no idea where she was going, she just knew she couldn't be where she had been. Movement without aim carried her through the labyrinth canopies of the camp. Her body was so filled with adrenaline that she felt she was running on the air above the world. As she knocked tables and tent poles and stands and stalls flying, as she pushed anonymous bodies to one side, she felt invisible and soaring.

It was some time before she could acknowledge the growing thunder she was moving towards as anything other than white noise. But gradually her legs became heavier and she slowed and her ears tuned in to the angry voices just ahead of her.
As she burst through a final line of tents, Aliyya tumbled into the open break of the market place. She crashed to a halt, the scene in front of her acting as a brick wall on her progress. A mass of people, men and women with hate in their eyes and words, shouted and brayed towards the corner of the marketplace. At the head of the rabid pack, men with the same black sash her attacker wore.

And in front of them stood the two strangers.

Our investigations that day had been quick and ominous. The site of the murder and the artron spike had led us to the cafes and meeting places that sat on the edges of communal areas in the camp. There was plenty of talk of the murder, plenty of speculation. The Faction was being spoken about in every corner.

Some thought it was a fifth column group, traitors that had been on the side of their enemy throughout the war. "Now it's all over," one particularly loud pub bore told me, "they think we should take the blame! Us! If we'd been all pulling together, it wouldn't be us in this bloody camp. And they expect to be put in charge, just cause they were shafting us back then."
Others knew the name Faction Paradox, even bragged about wanting to join them. "Oh yeah, I'm all for Faction Paradox. They're going to be big, and I'm going to be part of something."

But as we made our way through the camp, for every one that opened up there were two that turned away, that scuttled off from the table they'd been sat at. And gradually I noticed thick-set men wearing black sashes dotted around the corners of the crowds we walked through. Then, there were less people between the sash-bearers. Then, we were faced with a solid row of them and our investigation came to a sudden halt.
We were edged into the centre of the marketplace by them and surrounded. The anger in their faces seemed to spread throughout the crowd as people were pulled out of their daily routine by the scent of impending violence.

The pig-eyed sash-bearer at the front of the crowd started shouting about Maddox's computer, how we must be spies, infiltrators.
I bloody knew it! I'd told him, but he wouldn't listen.

And then, the logic of the crowd leapt from spies to killers. "It was you that killed them! You! This is our camp. Whatever's going on in the rest of Dust, we still stand here. So, it's our justice you're going to get!"
As I raised my arms in placation and my mind raced to think up a line of negotiation, that bull Maddox surged forwards. I could see he was shifting into battle mode, as artificial microbes raced around his body. They danced over his cornea, the odd capillary bursting along the way

as the red mist descended. Nanotech has a tendency to literalise metaphors.

It also has a tendency to exaggerate parts of yourself, so when the nano-augmentation kicks in you can become like a caricature of yourself. Maddox was single-minded to a fault in daily life, he dealt in facts and figures. Never one for nuance. The technology inside him brought this to the fore and gave simple response. We were being threatened with violence, so Maddox gave violence in return.
Efficient blows to pressure points on necks and solar plexus incapacitated attackers one by one. But, I could see the pace they came forward increasing, attacking in twos and threes. It was only a matter of time until Maddox became overwhelmed. While all eyes were on him, I scouted around for an exit strategy. All corners of the square were covered, physical exits blocked. I looked down at my time bracelet, checking its settings, seeing if I could get a lock on Maddox and find a temporal route out of here.

For hired help like me, temporal navigations a risky business. Throughout our investigations, we'd been reliant on following time trails and navigating via the footprints of our foes. A quick jump might get us out of this corner, but without someone or something to follow, I wasn't sure where we'd end up.
I frantically checked readings and coordinates as the numbers pouring towards Maddox became overwhelming. He'd put up quite a fight, but it was becoming clear now that he didn't have a chance, and it looked like I didn't either.

The body that had been called Maddox when it contained a life dangled from rope as the crowd reached up and clawed at its soles and feet, the odd palm reaching, knocking and making it twist and turn on the air imitating life.
Aliyya looked on at the edge of the market place, aghast at how these people could act. Violent anger that felt so far from her, from a group she had been told were her people.

The other man held his arms up at chest height, palms facing forwards in pacification. He took nervous steps back away from the mob.
"Look," Hedeth said with growing exasperation, "I haven't killed anyone here. I was looking for the people that did the killing! I promise!"

"Why should we believe you? None of us would desecrate our own like that."
Aliyya could feel the tensions rising again, almost even feel the air pressure around her tighten in response to the prickling crowd.

Hedeth sighed and dropped his hands. "Not that it matters now, but I'm looking for Faction Paradox. The blame lies with the Faction, and they'll be to blame for a lot worse if you don't let me pass."
"Lies!" the man at the head of the mob screamed. "There's no such thing as Faction Paradox! You think you can cover your tracks with stories, come here and do as you please. Well, you can't! We may have been driven from our homes, but the rules of our homeland still stand!"

There were grunts and shouts of agreement from the crowd as two black sashes stepped forward and grabbed Hedeth by the arms, pinning them to his sides and dragging him towards the spot where Maddox had hung.
Aliyya could not watch the same awful drama play out twice. She fought to control the rhythm of her breathing, stepped forward and yelled out, "Stop!" She had thought her voice small, but it echoed across the marketplace and to her surprise the action in front of

her paused. Frantically, she let the images in her mind flash past her as she stumbled for what to say.

“I do not believe this man had anything to do with the death we have seen,” she began slowly. “But if he did, what will stringing him up here achieve? I was always told our people were caring; what use is that if we only care for our own at the expense of others. I was always told that it was our right to rule, that history told us that. But it looks to me that we don’t even have the right to rule a pile of tents, if this is the justice we bring to it!”
Aliyya’s throat burned and her head was dizzyingly open, but she thought she felt good.

As the crowd continued to pause, Hedeth felt the hands pinning him in slacken off. He took the opportunity to shake himself free and quickly push passed the still bodies that surrounded them. He marched across the square and past Aliyya. Without a drop in his movement, he made eye contact with her and said “Thank you.” Then, he broke into a run.
I hadn’t time to stop and thank the girl properly, I just had to get out of there before the fear and anger of the crowd rose up again.

Maddox’s body was lowered and dumped at the edge of the square. Later that day, some of the black sashes had gone to collect it. But around the body, atoms had turned inside out and lit up like fireflies on the molecular level. They had burnt bright and spiralled around each other, then each tiny flame had been sucked back inside the atom that had expressed it and the body was gone. Any evidence of the murderous act had been sucked out of the universe with it.
The Houses asset recall system meant there wasn’t a body to remind people what happened, and my general experience in the field was that without a constant reminder history can be as easily forgotten as it can be shaped.

So, I was confident that with a bit more subtlety than poor Maddox had shown, I should be able to pick up the investigation and figure out what Faction Paradox had planned.
My day was spent buying drinks, striking up conversations, feeling my way around an empty space and talking about anything other than Faction Paradox until information came to me.

Gradually a picture emerged. They were putting feelers out across the camp, calling for Little Brothers and Sisters to join them. To many of these people, the arc of history had landed in the wrong place. So Faction Paradox’s silver-tongued offer had an echo. The camp was only a half-life, so they said. This was a chance to change everything, to be everything.
I could understand the appeal, familiar as it was.

But it was just rumour and gossip. Anyone that had taken up the Faction’s offer had left the camp by now, it seemed. As night came closer, the ritual could already be afoot. So, I decided to take a different tack.
If you want to find someone playing with causality, you go to the cross-sections. The longer something’s been there, the more memory is seeped into it, the more times history has cut across it. If you want to find someone messing with time the best place to look is somewhere there’s been lots of it. So, I walked to the edge of the camp, filtered my way through its porous border and headed out into the wasteland to the heart of Dust looking for something very big and very old.

Aliyya spent most of the rest of the day wandering the camp, without purpose, seeing very little of what she passed, ideas taking up her processing ability.

Before she realised where she was, she found herself skirting the very edges of the camp. Guards in the uniform of their enemy walked around its edges, a reminder of just who had won the war and on what terms this refuge was offered.

But her trance-like wandering continued and Aliyya slipped past them without even realising she was at any risk.
As night was setting in, she was out in the wasteland still wandering. The wind rose and licked around her, offering direction.

She listened and followed and before dawn a light appeared on the horizon. Like a moth, she moved towards it. Around her now were countless other moths, all moving through the wasteland, all heading for the light on the horizon that was not yet the dawn, all wearing bleached bone masks – the complex skulls of impossible creatures.

Ahead and to her left, Aliyya caught a flash of crimson red. It was the boy she had followed through the market. He was wearing wide purple robes that twisted and flowed with his movement, disguising the slightness of his frame, and his face was covered by the same bleach yellow-white skull mask that the growing number of figures drawing on this point wore.

No, not the same, she realised. As she looked around, Aliyya noticed that each of the masks was unique – variations on a theme, as if the bearer of the mask had somehow made up their own version of the beast whose face they wore.
But, despite his dress, she was sure it was him. The shock of red hair was enough to convince her. A chill went through Aliyya. She felt the hollow hunger of nerves pull in from her stomach, but also a tingle up her spine and a lightness to her step that made her feel she was on the cusp of something very important. That boy, the murder and the Faction. What did the stranger in the market call it? Faction Paradox! It felt so strange and so big, as if she were standing on the edge of a cliff and daring herself to jump but couldn't be sure what direction she'd travel in if she did.

As she drew nearer, the light on the horizon became clearer. A great pyre had been built up. As they arrived, the masked figures cast an object onto it, flames dancing and diving upwards with each. Once they had done this, they moved back out to the edge of a growing circle and sat cross-legged in silence. Progress slowed as the circle widened to the point where there were hundreds of rows to go back across, thousands of bodies cross-legged and prepared.
But prepared for what?

As her red-headed beacon reached the edge of the ring, Aliyya held back in the shadows and watched him pick his way through the crowd to cast his offering down.
Aliyya was entranced, unaware of anything I could be around her, sucked in by the deep, low chanting that was being taken up. It lapped gently across the assembled crowd until it was taken up by them all and had become a powerful tide coming in through each of them.

She knew this was not for her, she knew she was watching something other, something out of reach. But she could not look away.
Lost to the material world, Aliyya could not see the masked creature that crept towards her. Too late, she turned and saw the Little Brother guarding the ceremony. An underling not even important enough to give himself up here. But important enough to protect the ritual, he thought, to make sure the design is carried out. He stepped forward with

purpose, drawing a knife from his robe and raising it towards her. And then he lunged out and stabbed, his blade like a crescent moon in the dark. And she was dead. No longer aware of herself, or the passing of time or the sensation of cold and the gooseflesh that had crept up her arms moments before. All was gone and she was nothing.

Little Brother Taran looked upwards towards the dusty white suns that sat mid-day low in the sky above him. Squinting, he played back the events of the last hour in his mind's eye. This was the right thing to do, there was no doubt in him over that. But knowing what was to come, what this time now would be, and in many ways already was, each step he made felt slightly unreal. He felt his mind giddily expanding, and pressed on to find the point on this forsaken planet that Taran had decided would anchor him to this temporary reality for just a little while longer.
He and Cousin Noriko had discussed at great length the ceremony. As always, her points had been considered and enlightening. Her proposal of the I Ching made a lot of sense. Sixty-four hexagrams, sixty-four hours. Find a peaceful spot and contemplate them. Each drawn randomly over the course of the interregnum, one an hour, would reveal a picture of the universe to the Little Brother before he returned to complete the ritual. Taran even had a pack of the cards in his pocket, ready to do just that.

But in the moment, it hadn't felt right.
Taran prided himself in being under no illusions as to the nature of Faction Paradox, he knew that his conception of it, Noriko's, the Path of Changes, the bound mountain and the fire in heaven, was not orthodox Faction lore. Indeed, he understood that in many ways there was no such thing as orthodoxy within the Faction. Time and reality were mutable, Faction Paradox gleefully encouraged these mutations. But as he had sat cross-legged, surrounded by tens of thousands of Little Brothers and Sisters, he felt dismayed that so many seemed beneath this ceremony.

From his earliest days flitting on the edges of the Faction, hearing rumours and catching glimpses, paradox had filled him with a dizzying glee. He remembered the first time he'd been told tales of Great Cousins who had fallen on, or really fallen to, their own blade. Temporal Seppuku had seemed the ultimate denial of this reality, a sharp slap in the face of causality.
And the liminal realm, the hours until the return to the place that no roads can lead, seemed deeply spiritual. Time that was not and would never be.

Yet other recent initiates who had answered the call from across this sector saw it as little more than a hedonistic green-light. Un-time where actions were consequence-free.
Taran knew he was pure in his motivations. Yet looking around him, he could not help but be disturbed by the time-trails that shot off from so many mayfly Little Siblings.

These snail-like fourth dimensional trails had distracted him since his earliest experiments in time travel ritual. Each journey outside linear time made him increasingly aware of block reality, glimpsed from the corners of his eyes. And his mind trying to process it was like trying to squeeze a boulder into a matchbox.
Little Brother Taran needed to spend the next sixty-four hours as grounded as possible. And to do that, he needed to find something very big and very old. Wiping his brow, he licked his hand. The salt-tang of sweat centred his senses on the immediately material, and he walked on.

Two lines marked a path out across the wastelands of Dust, straight old roads newly marked. From opposing angles they drew a marker through the dirt, relining routes that had been here long before. From a higher dimensional viewpoint, they had already converged and always would be entwined.
From a strictly linear point of view, however, Little Brother Taran had got there first.

He sat within the shadow of a single stone megalith, cross-legged. The megalith stood four times his height. It cropped out at the centre of a slow gradient that spread away from that point almost imperceptibly, offering a wide view for miles and miles in every direction that the blue-wash stone stood watch over. Centuries of punishment from merciless weather had rounded and softened its angles, giving the rock a sort-of middle age paunch in its once-straight edges. But, it still stood tall and proud, a focal point for energy drawn in from lines across the planet.
Despite the protection its shadow offered from the mid-day suns, sweat dotted Taran's brow. His pale skin and narrow shoulders marked him out as someone designed to spend a lot of time indoors, ideally in cool libraries or dusty archives. How could he have known back then that hidden text he stumbled across would lead him to here? That first tantalising mention of Faction Paradox, hidden in the margins.

His head was a jumble of thoughts – flashes of other times, other worlds. The rush of everything that ever could be was making him lose the moment that was, now. He looked up at the outline of the megalith and breathed steadily. Its narrow, gentle time-trails betrayed its age and offered a sense of permanence and continuity that helped centre him.
And as Taran breathed, Hedeth approached.

I could see the boy beneath the stone was unaware of me. His eyes were open, but their focus was clearly within. My instincts had been right, a ritual on the scale we'd been getting hints of was always too much for some and using ancient objects as an anchor is an old time traveller's trick.
I used it to get my time legs early on in my relationship with the Great Houses. And, truth be told, I'd been to this very spot before. Back when this was Foreman's World, I sat just where the red-head Little Brother was now, letting the wind whisper and the wide grassy plains dance like waves before me.

A pang of guilt shot through me. He needed the centring I was about to pull him from. But I'd been sent here to do a job. I called out.

"Hey," Hedeth called out. "Wake up! Look at me!"

Taran's focus drew back out and towards the shouting. As his eyes fell onto Hedeth, his head span and a dizzying sickness rushed up within him. The time-trails of this man taunted, shooting off in multiple directions, assaulting Taran with double and triple vision.
"Please," he replied. "I was almost there, let me be!"

“Look at you,” Hedeth sneered. “Weak, shaking. You think the likes of you have any right to play with time?”
The challenge drew Taran’s eyes back into single vision. He could spend hours talking over the nature of time and the unreality of history with Cousin Noriko, his most treasured memories were of these discussions. But they were based on mutual respect and curiosity, this time traveller was offering a challenge.

“I don’t change history, I deny it and live!”
“Faction bullshit!” Hedeth spat out.

“So what if it is? It’s right!” Taran waved his arms excitedly around, pointing at the great megalith that towered above them, “Where do you think you are, ey? What do you think this is?”
The people of Dust told many stories of their founding fathers, the first to make planetfall. One of them was that they had placed the stone where it stood in tribute to sites of ancient wonder back on Old Earth. But it had been there a lot longer than that.

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter,” Taran continued. “The time-trails flowing off from this stone are gentle, soothing. It is from so far back that I cannot make out the shapes of the creatures working on it. All I can say for sure is that it’s been a very important place for a very long time. And it brings me peace.”
“But what is it without a history?” Hedeth sounded confused, to him the rock was an opening paragraph and the end of the war on this planet a conclusion. “Nothing has any meaning without shape. We’ve won the War in Heaven, we’re not going to let idiots like you mess up the nice, neat arc right at the very end.”

Taran shook his head and raised himself straighter, growing in confidence.
“No, you’re wrong. There have been a hundred different stories about this place, a hundred theories about what it was for and why it was built or who built it. And do you know what? None of them are right, but they’re all good.”

Now it was Hedeth who felt panicked and shaken.
“You don’t understand! The Intel that we’ve got says whatever ritual the Faction has lined up is big enough to tear this reality in two! You aren’t going to open things up to new stories or different shapes. You’re just going to rip up what’s already here.”

Taran looked up at the alignment of the twin suns and smiled. His time was nearly up, the interregnum was drawing to an end and he was ready to step back and face himself. He reached towards the ceremonial blade that hung from his waist and clasped its hilt.
“What is it that you want to save? The history or the people? I know what’s really important and we know what we’re doing.”

At that moment, the sixty-fourth hour came to a close. Time wrapped its fingers round Taran’s gentle frame and drew him back to the ritual ground.

I felt like I’d been pummelled in the face with a brick. But there was no time right now for this. Of course what I was doing was right! It had taken a while, but I was inches from the peak of reality and knew exactly what I was fighting for now. I wasn’t going to get taken in by Faction propaganda.

If I was quick, there was still time. I raised my wrist and started poking around at the time bracelet that had got me here in the first place – crude but effective time travel, and if I was

quick I could still get a lock on where the Little Brother had gone and follow in his footsteps.
And when I got there? The nanotech that coursed through our veins made every House Agent a walking weapon. A billion tiny explosions right in the centre of the ritual ground just before the paradox was completed – again, crude but effective.

I'd be gone, but history would remember me.

You are surrounded by a great, white light. It draws away from you, pulling at your skin and you are Hedeth. You have a mission, you have purpose. The white light abates and you see what surrounds you. To your right, a sea of people in the bone masks of Faction Paradox, mirror images emerging in front of them. The crowd doubling. To your left, the opaque girl that saved you. A tiny life.

Mesmerised, she cannot see the masked creature creep towards her. You see the glint of a blade in his right hand. Panicked, you dive towards her and push her to one side, forgetting the bizarre ritual behind you.
And she lives and she is aware, looking at you struggle. The cold and the sensation of gooseflesh spreads further up her arms and round her back.

The crescent moon cuts into you, but you hug your attacker in and claw his bone mask away. You thrust your calloused skull towards the bridge of his nose. He screams out and falls back, clutching at his bloodied face.
Nanotech races towards the knife's entry point and I am aware of myself. I look at the girl, small and fragile but brave and strong and the most important thing in the world.

Then, I remember the world is about to end and turn to face the ritual ground.

Taran stood face-to-face with himself. His past self spread his arms out in acceptance and raised his head towards the sky, taking in its expanse for a final time. His future self drew the ritual blade, traced a line up through the air and then plunged down and forward. The flesh offered more resistance than he expected. Taran thrust forward with all his might and as the blade cut its path he realised his previous self was pushing forward too, welcoming what was to come next.

As a final breath escaped from Taran's lungs, his future self started to glitch. He flicked in and out of existence like a paused VHS, and in response his body leaning on the ritual blade did the same.
Across the ritual ground, thousands of Little Brothers and Little Sisters repeated these actions, locked in an inescapable pause that was and was not infinitely.

As the closed loop ate itself over and over, waves of artron energy spread out from its centre. They tugged at the edges of reality and atoms began to separate and draw together simultaneously, this plain unsure as to which direction it would disappear in.
Then from unseen corners, drawn together like smoke, the outline of a thousand silhouettes emerged. The suggestion of a mouth appeared in the smoke's impression of a face; they widened into Munch-like screams and gorged themselves on the waves of artron energy flowing about them.

As they fed, reality stabilised. The paradox remained, but the lives that danced around it continued unabated.

But as these nightmare creatures from the depths of reality fed, there was movement in the glitches.

Taran's shadows began to jump to a different rhythm than his bodies. Then, they stepped away altogether, freed from causality by the ritual. They reached towards each other, embraced and became one. Each cast a shadow of the other so there was no way to know which was the actor and which the impression. Across the ritual ground, the action was repeated.
The silhouettes were absorbed in their feeding and did not see the first blows from the shadow creatures, but they were ready for the second.

And a great battle raged, trapped within the space of the temporal glitch. A violent eternity in a moment of paradox.

You find yourself in moments. You can tell yourself over and over again that you're a certain type of person, that these are your morals, the standards you live by. But in a moment, you react without thinking and discover a deeper truth. And once you've found that out, it's impossible to put everything back in the box. You can never look at the world, or a person, or a place the way you had before.

I'd reacted in the moment, and saved the girl I now know as Aliyya. As the knife plunged into me, my nanotech raced to the wound to thicken the blood and knit the flesh. In minutes, it was hardened scar tissue. But, occupied with that, I couldn't become the bomb I had planned.
I thought back to the words of the Little Brother. Was it the history or the people? In that moment, it had been one person. Maybe that's enough.

I've been tracking Faction Paradox throughout this time sector for a long time now. I know the shadow play they specialise in. That ritual was big, loud, ostentatious. Experience tells me when the Faction do something like that with one hand, it's cause they don't want you to look at what the other is doing.
But, truthfully, I'm out. A moment can change a life, and it's time for me to drop out of history so I can live. Maybe it's something you can look into, and if we meet again you can tell me if my hunch was right. But for now, that's me done.

That evening, they sat around a campfire, Aliyya and Hedeth. Looking up above them, they took in the dark blue blanket of the night's sky and the clusters of stars glimmering across it. Hedeth was always fascinated when he travelled by the different formations these clusters of celestial bodies made. The change from one planet to another, let alone from one sector to the next, meant new patterns and connections emerged. Yet he knew these patterns were experiential, all formed by the perspective the viewer brought to them.
The head of a snake or the belt of a great warrior could be made up of points that when actually travelling through them bore no functional relationship to one another. And as space expanded out from galactic centre, even those patterns changed with the additional perspective of time.

On Old Earth, they had a star of the North, bright and permanent, guiding the way. But if you were to go to that burnt out rock now, braving the radiation storms, and look up

through your protective goggles to the spot from which it once stood watch, there'd be nothing there. It had stretched and shifted so it pointed the wrong way home long before it went supernova.
Yet the eyes that find these patterns have a remarkable ability to assume a permanence, Hedeth felt. He loved the tales connected to these patterns on the planets he had visited.

"Tell me the story of your stars," he asked Aliyya.
She knew them well from her childhood. Stories of great men that had come before them, whose names were honoured in battle. But those stories felt wrong now. So she looked at the patterns afresh and allowed new shapes to emerge.

She was struck for the first time by the gaps between the stars, and told a story of creatures made of shadow and smoke locked in struggle. Of chaos and change just out of sight. But she also saw the stars scattered over this, glowing out, some alone, some only making patterns with one or two others, and she told tales of the lives lived in the cracks. Of loneliness and sadness and of burning joy when brief connections were made. Stories of the mayfly spirit dancing beneath the spectre of death.
And her tales travelled on the wind that night and I felt them riding my back and I heard them patter on my cracked surface and, finally, I felt them deep in my core. And I felt the time of Dust was over and it was time to spring again.

The End of the Beginning

George Mann & Philip Marsh

The War was over.

The temporal conflict had raged for all of time, and yet no time at all. It had seen entire civilisations erased from existence or reborn in new forms; had seen reality itself edited like lines of imperfect script; had given birth to innumerable, multi-faceted paradoxes that had rewritten the very shape of the universe. It had been everything and nothing. It had been reality itself.

Now, it had finally stuttered to a close. Time was slowly coalescing, re-knitting itself, establishing coherent timelines from the detritus of what had gone before.

The few surviving civilisations that had been aware of the War breathed such a collective sigh of relief that the psychic resonance caused further ruptures, reshaping planets and causing at least one deleted species to burst forth from the null anew. When they saw what had become of the universe, this recreated race hastily built and detonated a doomsday device that saw twelve billion souls committed to the ether, as the crust of their world boiled away into the void, their home world rendered forever uninhabitable.

Still others were concerned to find peace once again thrust upon them, having spent the War adapting both their societies and their biologies to the vagaries of a conflict with no apparent end, or producing temporal force fields to shield their worlds from being inadvertently scoured from the hollows of time – for the highest of prices, of course. Prices they could now ill-afford.

Yet there was one particular species that reacted with a most curious response – a species that, until the latter days of the War, had found little reason to ever leave their unremarkable planet, or to engage upon the wider stage of the embattled universe. For them, the end of the War inspired an entirely different emotion – all-encompassing panic, and the fear of the absolute collapse of their civilisation.

Collapse, however, was not to be, for there were those amongst them with an ear for the celestial. Those who would hear the message that came bubbling across the astral plane, transmitted by ceremony as opposed to technology – a message that, upon the hearing of it, caused the death of twelve heralds, whose minds unfolded inside the confines of their all-too-fragile skulls, and who scratched the decoded words upon the walls of their skywards in their brothers' blood:

The Paradox unravels. The Unbecoming is upon us. All who belong to the Faction must gather now, at these co-ordinates.

And so it was that the inhabitants of that unassuming world took flight, and like a shoal of ravenous piranha, swam hungrily across the void.

The Nambiro were coming to Dust.

They were hungry, and they were going to feast on the last great Paradox.

The journey across the stars proved tiring, however, and as hours stretched into days into weeks, the will of the Nambiro grew weak. Distraction plagued their every move, for the universe was still in the throes of rebirth, and fresh paradoxes bloomed and withered in all directions, before and after. And yet still they held their course, for the scent of the Faction was like blood in the water, and soon all else had been forgotten and they were driven by a desperate need that overwhelmed all other concerns.

In time, they reached the planet Dust.

To most space-faring races the dust-ravaged surface of the planet held nothing of apparent interest – a world barely worthy of recording in a flight log – and yet, to the Nambiro, Dust held the scent of the finest vintage wine; the deepest and richest and most appetising of all. This was a scent that could not be ignored. This was what they had craved for millennia: the knotty heart of the Paradox.

Thus it was that, without consideration or pause, the Nambiro swarmed into the atmosphere of the world to begin their greatest, and final, feast.

On the surface of Dust, those members of Faction Paradox that had responded to the call unfolded out of thin air like politicians at election time, both fearful and intrigued by the nature of the message that had summoned them across all of time and space – or at least, all that remained of it in the aftermath of the War.
To an uninformed observer the actions of these multitudes might have seemed outlandish, bizarre: to gather here, in the middle of a desert, unprotected from the glaring heat of twin suns. Yet those who had previously encountered such agents knew all too well that it was always best to leave the Faction to their own devices.
If anyone had cared enough to examine more closely what the Faction were doing out there in the desert, they would have witnessed, amongst the sea of blood-greetings and ritual acknowledgement, an army of Cousins engaged in drill practice with their shadow weapons, organised and regimented with military precision. They would have seen bases being constructed amongst the jagged rock formations that jutted from the desert sands, visible only to those who knew where, and how, to look. And if they had understood enough of the Faction's rituals to recognise exactly what was being practised, they would have had to come to a single, inevitable conclusion:
The Faction were preparing for war.

Z'akbo Eji dodged backward, barely managing to skip out of the arc of the blade that had been about to slice through their cheek. With their opponent unbalanced, Z'akbo used the momentum of the dodge to whirl into a spin, bringing their own shadow blade upward and slicing off the hand of their attacker, whose weapon went flying across the room. Before the assailant had even reacted to the sudden loss of their hand, Z'akbo drove their blade between her ribs. The woman discorporated into vapour.
The sound of applause carried across the room. Z'akbo acknowledged it with a bow of the head, while reflecting silently that the applause of a single pair of hands always sounded slightly mocking, no matter how genuine the intent.
"Well done," said the woman.
"Thank you, Mother," Z'akbo said. It had been the hardest test they had yet undergone, with an opponent of unparalleled skill. There had even been a moment in which Z'akbo had not been entirely confident that they would win.
"A most impressive display. Were the circumstances different, I would enjoy sparring with you myself, rather than simply watching you dispatch simulated warriors."
And you'd put up more of a challenge, Z'akbo thought. In human terms (so far as Z'akbo could judge them) she appeared elderly, with white, wispy hair and a strangely pliable face, saggy with the burden of time. Her reputation as a warrior, however, was undiminished – only last year, Mother Hangaku had led the Faction forces into the field on Callister, rescuing the crew of a crashed time-ship and obliterating each and every one of the fearsome Callisti warriors who'd swarmed the crash site. Despite her advanced age, she moved with an ease and grace that suggested her days of greatness were not yet behind her.
"It would be an honour, Mother," Z'akbo replied.
"You just dispatched Princess Nachiya, most accomplished warrior of the Great Imperium. Legend had it that so graceful was she in combat that her enemies would simply watch in awe as she cut her way through their armies, and give themselves gladly to her sword." A wistful smile caressed Hangaku's face. "The day I slew her in single combat I saw a beauty that I have never seen equalled – not even in her bed."
Z'akbo managed to keep their surprise in check – never before had the Mother offered such a personal insight into the emotions that swelled beneath her reserved exterior. *Either she's going soft – which I doubt – or there's something on her mind.*
"Anyway, we have more pressing matters to attend to," said Hangaku. "I understand you are keen to be assigned a mission to prove your value to the Faction. That you seek

recognition as a Cousin."
"That is correct, Mother. It is my deepest wish to be granted a place within the Family."
She nodded, her smile becoming wry on the curve of her lips. "Follow me, Z'akbo," she said. She turned and left the room. Z'akbo immediately fell into step behind her.
"We have been observing your progress most intently," she continued, as they passed along the corridors of the training facility. "Your skills as a warrior are formidable, but also your attitude, your love of the Family. You have been tested in ways you are not even aware of and have succeeded in even the most challenging, like Koi climbing a waterfall."
Z'akbo had no idea what a 'Koi' was, or why it would climb falling water, but decided to take this simply as the compliment it was clearly intended to be. Such was the Mother's stature in the Family that she had long ago decided that if someone wanted access to her wisdom, they could bloody well work for it – she would not change her manner of speaking for anyone.
"Thank-you Mother," they said, side-stepping the issue. "It is, as you know, my greatest desire to become a full Cousin and serve the Family."
"Because you wish to serve your new family, or save your old one?"
It was a question Z'akbo had wrestled with before – was their devotion due to a love of the Faction, or because their elevation to Cousin would be completed by returning to, and preventing, the space-craft accident that had orphaned them and brought Z'akbo into the arms of the Faction.
"My loyalty is to the Faction Mother – and that loyalty is only strengthened by the opportunity to save my parents."
They had gone deeper into the base than Z'akbo had previously been allowed. The base had been discovered in the stub of a timeline in a quiet little backwater of the universe, buried deep within the crust of an asteroid, abandoned but in perfect working order. The Faction had moved in and transformed the place into a training facility for gifted initiates – those seeking to earn their status as Cousins within the extended family of the Faction. Protective runes had been daubed on the walls, creating a shield of impossibility around the base. Now, even if the original owners ever did return to attempt to reclaim what was once theirs, they would no longer be able to find it.
"We have been aware for some time," she said, "of a threat to the very existence of the Faction. A threat that we believe that you can help us neutralise."
Z'akbo frowned. "How serious a threat are we talking?"
"I believe it is no exaggeration to suggest that it might be the greatest threat that the Faction has ever faced."
Z'akbo's frown deepened. "Then where do I fit in? What can a mere Initiate do in such a situation?"
"You have certain...skills which we require. Skills we have been testing in your training. But first, another test..."
They had reached a dead end in the corridor. Hangaku faced the dead-end wall and raised both hands, tracing a complex symbol in the air before her face. With a sudden shifting of the air, the wall ceased to be a wall and became a stark metal door, which slid open with a gentle sigh. Hangaku and Z'akbo stepped through.
On the other side of the door was a large hangar. It had obviously been designed to accommodate several ships, but at present only one vessel occupied the cavernous space, its hull glinting in the stygian depths. Z'akbo had seen the Faction's time-ships and had even heard tales of their rarely glimpsed war-ships, so was surprised to find that the ship in front of them was, by Faction standards, a strangely conventional craft – narrow and sleek as though concerned with aerodynamics. Only the eldritch symbols etched into its side panels suggested it bore any relationship to the Faction at all.
"This," Hangaku said, "is our greatest secret – a prototype, an experiment…" She drawled the word, like the purr of a lugubrious cat. "It's called a Needleship for reasons that will be obvious from its appearance. It was designed from the first for a very specific pilot." She turned to Z'akbo and smiled. "You."
"Me? You're not usually in the habit of making jokes, Mother."
"No, and it is not a habit I am intending to adopt. Now, we must know if our technomancers have been successful in their labours. Please, take your place in the ship. Test it."

Z'akbo swallowed, the confidence felt in the simulation room completely dissipated. *If the plan is this desperate, then she also wasn't joking about how serious the situation is*. "But I don't know how to fly it. Surely it would be better to begin with a simulator…"
"If we have done our work correctly, you will be able to fly the craft. Show faith, Initiate. The Family waits with bated breath."
Unsure, but unwilling to demonstrate weakness before Hangaku, Z'akbo crossed to the ship and slowly climbed up into the cockpit. The control panel re-enforced the idea that this was not of typical Faction design – like the station they had been living in, it felt as though designed by other minds and adapted by the Faction – a suspicion made stronger by the one piece of apparatus that did appear Faction-made – a small temporal engine which had been grafted into the workings of the ship. It was small and had limited range – designed for undetectable limited time-jumps. Hangaku had retreated into the control booth and Z'akbo realised she was operating the hangar door controls. In a moment, all oxygen in the room would be sucked out into the vacuum.
The panel before Z'akbo was unmarked. They studied the controls, trying to work out which of them would close the cockpit lid. Z'akbo fought a spreading sense of panic, trying to remember their training.
Think of the Cousins. Think of the Family.
Z'akbo reached for the controls, allowing instinct to guide their hand. There was a silver button, nestled amongst a row of seemingly identical silver buttons. They pressed it.
For a moment, nothing happened. Z'akbo craned around in the cockpit, trying to see out. Hangaku had now retreated from view, and the hangar doors continued to slide open with ominous precision.
Z'akbo considered punching all the buttons at random. The whistle of escaping air from the hangar was becoming an agonised scream and their vision was becoming blurred. Panic set in with the gasps for air. *I'm going to die here, in an airless hangar, in a ship I should never have even attempted to fly, while the Faction are relying on me to save them from a threat I don't even understand…*
And then the lid of the cockpit began to slowly slide into place – far too slowly for Z'akbo's comfort – and with a pneumatic hiss, clamped shut. As Z'akbo breathed a sigh of relief, the control panel blinked to life before them. Buttons illuminated, screens flickered, readouts bubbled out of the static. None of the sigils or markings made immediate sense, but Z'akbo felt eerily calm – as if the ship had already begun to respond to their presence, somehow welcoming them aboard.
Intuition took over. Z'akbo let their hands move through the most natural-feeling sequences, brushing the controls. The engines fired with a kinetic roar, and with a jerk the ship rose from the ground, hovering for a moment, before darting forward through the hangar doors and out into the inky void beyond.
Z'akbo felt a sense of immense freedom. The ship was responding to their every intention, their every caress. To Z'akbo, it felt like the simulation of a surreal dream, in which they had suddenly taken to the air, weightless and free. They swam through the endless night, describing concentric wheels around the circumference of the asteroid. However hard they banked, whatever manoeuvre they attempted, the ship reacted in perfect harmony to their thoughts.
The comms unit crackled to life. "It seems our experiment was a success," came the wry voice of Hangaku. "You are as skilled with the controls as you are with a shadow-blade. Please return to the dock and prepare for your mission briefing."
"What I am about to tell you has, until now, remained a secret from all but those Faction agents actively involved in missions relating to the emergency – and even then, only to those whose lives depended on it…or mattered."
The matter-of-factness of that statement chilled Z'akbo, and they wondered which of the two categories they fell into – probably both. They were back in the training room. Hangaku was speaking in clear, precise and calm language, completely turning Z'akbo's world upside down.
"As you are aware, for most of its existence, the Faction has sent out agents to quietly carry out missions across the entirety of the Spiral Politic; nudging history here, tucking timelines there. Generally, these agents act alone or as a pair." She searched Z'akbo's face, as if looking for something. "For the most part, these missions prove well within the

capabilities of said agents, but, from time-to-time, things go wrong and the occasional agent has been known not to return from their mission. This is, of course, regrettable, but nevertheless inevitable."
"Someone's gone missing," said Z'akbo, flatly.
Hangaku inclined her head. "It was a little while before we noticed the change; an ever-so-slight increase in the number of agents who had failed to return. Accidents, attrition, desertion…all factors to be considered. And yet, when the datamancers had compiled the statistics, a clear picture began to emerge; we were shedding agents. Someone, or something, was running interference, playing us at our own game."
"An enemy agency?" Z'akbo said.
Hangaku shrugged. "A full investigation was mounted. The last known locations of the missing agents were scoured. In most instances, the agents had simply vanished without a trace. But then we got lucky. Cousin Belamus located a missing time-ship, abandoned close to the point of one such disappearance. We communed with the ship's consciousness and found it had recorded what had happened." Hangaku stepped back, creating a space between them. "This is the recording." She traced a symbol with her hands.
An image flickered to life in the air before Z'akbo, faint and transparent, like a half-forgotten memory. It depicted a vast area of rocky terrain, cast in the deepening shadows of night. For a moment, Z'akbo stared at the empty landscape, wondering what they were supposed to be seeing. Then two Faction agents walked into view, locked in deep conversation. They moved away from the ship, and then stopped, one of them looking around as though they had heard or sensed something off camera. After a moment they continued walking.
It was then that something – no, two somethings – dipped momentarily into view, like strange amphibious creatures diving for prey. It was hard to discern the details, but Z'akbo could see enough. The creatures – whatever they were – bore down on the Faction agents and engulfed them, wrapping their fleshy wings around the agents to form tight, gelatinous cocoons.
The agents struggled for a moment, but could get no purchase, and soon their struggling became weaker, and then ceased. The amorphous creatures rose up, leaving nothing but the husked remains of the agents on the ground, before even these paper-thin shells collapsed in on themselves and disintegrated, like dust on the wind.
No wonder no remains were never found, Z'akbo thought, queasily.
The creatures launched themselves into the air, and a moment later the recording ended.
"Once we saw the recording we did a full sweep of any life-form even vaguely matching the one on the recording, but found nothing," said Hangaku. "We don't believe the creatures originated on that planet, but instead were lying in wait for our agents to arrive. This, we believe to be their modus operandi – they set traps, create false signals throughout space and time, signals they know we will not be able to resist. They attack upon the arrival of our agents, leaving nothing behind them but dust. Our agents don't even get the chance to call for help."
"But why focus on the Faction?" Z'akbo said.
"We think we know the answer to that. Once we knew what we were looking for, we found a way to set some traps of our own. We broke our own pattern, sent a team of three to investigate one of the signals. The third agent remained in the time ship, and when the creatures attacked, he instigated a containment field, ensnaring the creatures."
"And the other agents?"
Hangaku peered at him, but said nothing. Clearly, they had not been among those deemed to matter.
"So we have the creatures in captivity?"
"We have one of them. The other was placed in a containment field on the planet Dust, with a Faction agent left behind to observe it, to test its strengths and weaknesses. The other is in our lab undergoing more...direct tests." She sniffed. "As you saw, the creatures are amphibian in appearance, but have developed the means to traverse the void, propelling themselves through atmosphere and void alike."
"And they feed on people?"
"In a manner of speaking. At first we thought the creatures simply fed on the potential time energy of the living, but as we studied them, we realised this wasn't the case. Slowly,

the creatures grew sickly in captivity, showing signs of withdrawal and addiction. We applied the appropriate pressure. Soon, we discovered they could communicate, and our interpreters decoded their archaic language. When they learned we could understand them, they begged us for salvation."
"Salvation?" Z'akbo said.
Hangaku nodded. "That is why the Nambiro – for that is their name – have been hunting the Faction. They are drawn to Paradox energy. Addicted to it, unable to control themselves in its presence. We're not a food source to them, we're a drug. The Nambiro are addicted to the energies released by paradoxes – and we, Z'akbo, are their fix."

Almost the entire Faction had now gathered on Dust. Runes had been drawn, weapons prepared, armies positioned. The Faction was ready. The Family stood as one against the oncoming storm.
In the sky above the plain, a dark dot grew rapidly bigger, as though a meteorite were falling to earth. Only this was no meteorite.
Slowly, the dot increased in size until it reached gargantuan proportions, still only kissing the upper atmosphere but already blocking out the sun. Seen from the ground, the sky was nothing but a seething mass of creatures, sliding over one another in abject excitement, barely able to contain themselves with the sweet smell of paradox so close at hand.
And then, whether due to a command or a sudden collapse of willpower, the Nambiro attacked, swooping low. On the ground, the Faction agents unsheathed their shadow-weapons, daubed protective runes on their clothing and steadfastly tried to remember their orders. Coming at them was an onslaught of ferocious, desperate creatures, ready to absorb their very essence.
The command was given, and the Faction went to war.

"So, what's the plan? How do we defeat them?" said Z'akbo. *And from what you've told me, it'd better be good.*
"We had to find a way to draw them out into plain sight," said Hangaku, seemingly ignoring the question. "To draw a bead, to find a target." She smiled. "We carried out further…interrogations on the captive Nambiro. We learned their taste for paradox energy had developed during the War, when a battle fought close to their home planet spilled over, drenching its surface in a temporal backwash during the fallout from a ruptured time ship."
"And once they had a taste for it, they wanted more," said Z'akbo.
"Precisely. They began scavenging the battlefields, desperately consuming any trace of latent paradox energy. Being in the vicinity of a war-zone is a dangerous occupation, however, so the Nambiro decided it would be more profitable to take a more proactive approach. Tentatively, they began to search us out, hunting us, laying traps."
"And that's when we started to notice agents going missing? An unusual amount of failed missions?"
Hangaku nodded. "Exactly. The tolerance was off. We noticed the interference. So, we laid our plans. We decided to make the Nambiro think the War was over, that an armistice was being signed. We sent agents across the galaxy to spread news of the Peace disguised as travelling players and experimented with technologies to alter the perceptions of millions at a time. We allowed one of the Nambiro prisoners to think it had escaped from captivity on Dust, but in truth, we orchestrated the escape and sent it on a wild goose chase in search of a Book of the Future that promised to reveal how the timelines would unfold in the wake of the armistice. The book was a fake, of course, but we allowed the escaped Nambiro to return to its people, to whom it disseminated the information it had gleaned. We planted ideas in their minds; seeds that would blossom. And in the end, we convinced the Nambiro that, with the war over, the Faction would be the only remaining source of paradox energy in the universe. We held a ritual, sending a signal to the family to come to Dust en masse to a closed moment in time – which of course will create a scent

trail the Nambiro can't possibly resist. They're coming for us – the entire race – sick with hunger, unable to resist the thought of finding the entire Faction massed on Dust, ready to be consumed. And once they arrive, we fight."
"So...we draw them out and then destroy them?" *Not quite the brilliant plan I was hoping for.*
"Oh," Hangaku replied in the dismissive tone only a warrior who has travelled beyond all thought of the importance of life and death can produce, "in a straight-forward conflict, the Nambiro will undoubtedly wipe us out. They outnumber us, and they are desperate. Nevertheless, I will be going to Dust shortly to join the Family in battle."
"And me?" *What part do I have to play in this seemingly hopeless resistance to genocide?*
"As you will no doubt have guessed, you have a different and very particular role to play. A role that no-one but you could possibly fulfil."

The final time-ship materialised on the surface of the planet Dust. Mother Hangaku emerged, adorned in warrior's dou, protective runes sown into the fabric of the garment. Above, the sky roiled, tens of thousands of Nambiro swarming, their excitement palpable. Hangaku took her place at the front of the Family. And then, with the roar of thousands of voices, the clouds burst, and Nambiro attacked, falling like terrifying raindrops onto the Faction below.

Z'akbo's mind drifted.
The ship's controls were so intuitive – so in tune with Z'akbo's instincts – that they demanded almost no attention at all. Instead, Z'akbo found themselves replaying the details of the briefing given to them by Hangaku.
"Tell me, Z'akbo," she had asked, "where do you think things go when they've been erased from the timeline?"
"Go? I'm not sure I fully understand the question. If they're erased, then surely they never happened in the first place? They cease to have ever existed."
"But by the nature of paradox, to be erased, they must have first existed. So, what happens to planets, or species, or people that go from the here to the have-never-been?"
"I've never thought of it like that," Z'akbo had replied. It was a disconcerting thought. "Perhaps when I'm a proper Cousin, I'll be schooled in temporal theory, and might be better placed to offer a satisfactory answer."
"Well, consider this your first lesson," said Hangaku. She traced another symbol with her fingertips, and the shimmering image of a planet appeared in the air. "This is – or rather, was – Patraxis 5. It used to exist in the Horsehead Nebula. A minor skirmish took place nearby between the Great Houses and the Enemy. The planet was unaffected by the battle, but the population was not. They grew paranoid that they might find themselves caught in the cross-fire, and dedicated their entire economy to researching and developing a means of protecting themselves from eradication."
"Did they succeed?"
"In a manner of speaking. Their science leaned toward the biologic arts, rather than the technological. They spawned a creature that absorbed the energy released when paradox occurs – that, in essence, consumed paradoxes. If they were to find themselves in danger from the temporal powers, they reasoned, they would release the creature as a means of self-defence, a way of protecting their own timeline from interference." Hangaku had smiled, then, at some hidden amusement. "Unfortunately for the Patraxions, one or both of the great powers learned of the creature and decided that if it were to fall into the wrong hands it could be weaponised against them – and so they stole a march on the other side, and erased the planet before the creature could be deployed."
"In what sense can that be classed a success?" said Z'akbo.
"Well...they weren't erased accidentally. So they achieved their goal. But you're missing the point. They were erased only after developing the creature."
"And the planet, along with the creature, was sent to this so-called place where things that are erased are deposited?"

“Correct. When a new time-line is inserted into the universe, the old one is squeezed out through the gaps. And what happens when you squeeze time and space into a single point?”
“You mean...a singularity?”
“Of a sort.” Hangaku shrugged. “We’re very much in the theoretical realm now. As far as we’re aware, no species can exist in that other place – at least not in the shape and form they were. The population of Patraxis 5 will have been either killed or...”
“Or?”
“Or transformed somehow into a different kind of life. For the creature, though, the trip would have been something entirely different. We believe it could have survived. If we could find a means to deliver someone into that nether realm to find it and bring it back, we might have a chance at stopping the Nambiro.”
“By weaponising it against them?” ventured Z’akbo.
“No,” said Hangaku. “By sending the creature back in time to the battle which first awoke such a hunger in the Nambiro, and having the creature absorb the paradox energy instead. If the Nambiro never become addicted, they never come in search of us. And best of all, the great powers won’t even notice.”
And then Z’akbo had asked the most obvious question which had led to the most extraordinary answer.

The Nambiro attacked with the recklessness of a starving horde.
Spells offered by the Faction’s most adept agents made the atmosphere thick and viscous, slowing the Nambiro’s descent, allowing more time for the Faction’s agents to react. A Faction Warship that had been hiding in a nearby wrinkle in space-time burst forth, ambushing the Nambiro from behind and causing heavy casualties. Shadow blades flashed, and Nambiro fell from the sky.
The sheer weight of numbers was against the Faction, however, and the Nambiro pushed on, each wave stronger and mightier than the last. Soon, the mass of the dead became a burden to the Faction, miring them in the viscous, gelatinous corpses of despatched Nambiro, slowing the Cousins as they fought against relentless attacks. At the edge of the atmosphere, the Nambiro swarmed over the Warship, battering its hull. It was all the crew could do to stop the craft from spinning dangerously out of control.
With every passing moment, more members of the Faction were captured and absorbed, eroding their numbers and making it harder and harder to resist the onslaught.
Hangaku had been right in her prediction: the Faction were being massacred.
A warning note sounded from Z’akbo’s console. The ship’s sensors had indicated that their target was in sight.
“So, what can I do about it?” Z’akbo had asked in disbelief.
“You can do what no one else in the Faction can do. You can cross over into the other realm and retrieve the creature.”
The ship had reached the former location of the erased planet, Patraxis 5. Now there was nothing here – nothing save for a tiny fissure in space-time, like a scab that had healed over an old wound, so small that it barely registered on the scanner.
“It seems the day we found you as a child, the only survivor of the crash that killed your parents, may transpire to be the most important day in the history of Faction Paradox. We have been carrying out tests on all our Cousins and Initiates, seeking members from any species that could possibly survive the journey into the nether dimension in the Needleship. You are the only one we found.”
Z’akbo manoeuvred the ship so that it was aimed directly at the fissure.
“What is more, because you have yet to progress to become a full Cousin, you are not yourself saturated with paradox energy, meaning you can operate without drawing the attention of the Nambiro, enabling you to travel unmolested.”
Z’akbo flew straight at the fissure.
“And then you will be able to enter that other realm – where all erased time-lines are pressed together into one. And you must find the creature there, and bring it back safely.”
Just before the ship crashed into the hardened reality, Z’akbo pressed a button on instinct, and the ship jumped.

“Good luck Initiate Z’akbo. The survival of Faction Paradox is in your hands.”
One moment there was nothing but the vastness of space, pinpricks of light from stars a million light years away...
…and then the scale of the outer world changed so suddenly as to produce a moment of intense claustrophobia. Because instead of a smooth glide through the enormity of space, Z’akbo found themself surrounded on all sides by a darkness which was not simply the absence of light, but a thing in itself. The light of no stars burned holes in it, either because there was none or because the substance did not allow it. Only directly in front of the craft, and a few feet either side, was there anything other than blackness. The Needleship had come to rest on what Z’akbo at first glance took to be a kind of liquid, sparkling with its own internal luminescence, glistening waves carrying the ship along.
The ship’s sensors indicated that there was some kind of breathable atmosphere outside the ship so Z’akbo opened the cockpit up and the lid slid back into position. Z’akbo took a deep breath, testing the atmosphere -
– a soldier, cowering in a trench, hoping the enemy forces wouldn’t see her
– a father, grieving the loss of his daughter
– the taste of the first apple of spring
Z’akbo jolted back to the present, mental defences kicking in. Those had not been their memories. A familiar sweet scent filled their nose and mouth, like the smell of rain. Time – that’s what this place smelled of. Z’akbo looked down, and realised that the Needleship was sailing on a river of time – escaped moments spilling out of the universe in drops made of seconds and waves made of hours, flowing down a tributary to…where?
Better prepared, Z’akbo took another breath and managed to control the rush of images, random scenes from lives connected only by the fact that they had never been lived. Voices of the lost whispered from the waves, the only sounds beneath the dark canopy. Memories foamed on top of the water, trapped in bubbles which popped open to release them into the air, wanting to be remembered again by the only person who could capture them and save them from being washed away.
Or maybe that was just the way Z’akbo’s mind made sense of it. Whichever, Z’akbo had a mission they wouldn’t complete by drifting along here. On the control panel was a section they had not touched yet. From the diagrams on the panel it appeared that the craft had some kind of propeller system. Z’akbo activated it and after a moment the Needleship started moving forward with greater urgency.
Whoever had designed this ship, Z’akbo thought, knowing beyond doubt that it wasn’t the Faction, whatever Hangaku said, *knew exactly what was needed on this side of the jump.* Which led to many more questions than answers.

Hangaku fought with a beauty and grace that could inspire a death cult – pirouetting with shadow-blades extended, somehow unencumbered by the bodies piled up around her. The Nambiro were slowing – less because of the protection wards of the Faction, she considered, and more from exhaustion following their long swim through space.
Additionally, many of the Nambiro had yet to claim a victim and were, to use an Earth term, junk sick. Nevertheless, they had done enough damage to eliminate any doubt about the end result of the battle if Z’akbo did not succeed in their mission.
The warriors Hangaku had trained were fighting valiantly but had been reduced to their bare bones – in many cases, literally. Now, it was a simple matter of delaying the inevitable.
She looked upwards just in time to see the Warship as it fell from the sky, smoke billowing from its burning engines. It struck the ground, tearing a furrow in the dusty loam, and the ensuing explosion threw dust and rock into the middle of the battlefield, while the temporal energy released tore through the Faction like a fire through dry grass.

With the propellers running, it didn’t take long for the Needleship to sight land. As it approached, the sky opened up as the ship exited the tunnel it had been travelling down.
The world into which Z’akbo emerged had the feeling of a clear night on an unoccupied

world – the silence was so absolute that it rang like tinnitus. The sight was awe-inspiring.
In the sky was an impossibility of planets – vast spheres of every size and hue hung motionless in a dark sky, like a scaled-down mobile of a solar system dangling from the roof of a child's bedroom.
Close by, a sun burned bright and livid – so close that the flesh should have shrivelled on Z'akbo's bones…and yet it did not. Around the sun hung a twinkling constellation; familiar to Z'akbo as the home of twenty-three inhabited planets – or had been, until the Great Houses (or was it the Enemy?) had booby-trapped it to cover their retreat from a major skirmish. A pursuing battleship had tripped the booby trap and the constellation, and the entire Nebula, had been infected with a temporal virus that erased the whole area – and everyone within it – from history. And yet here it was, hanging like a elaborate decoration.
Z'akbo had heard of galaxies and space-battles that found themselves trapped in frozen time, sold to the highest bidder at auctions for the obscenely wealthy, with the trapped souls reduced to nothing but baubles or features on ceilings or in swimming pools.
Z'akbo brought the Needleship into harbour, the river splitting into streams that ran around the landmass. The shore was dry dirt, dead soil fed by dead time. In the distance they could see structures of some kind, indistinct in the haze. They set off towards them, shadow-blade at the ready.

Hangaku was surprised when she opened her eyes – she hadn't expected to be alive. The temporal energy released by the fallen warship should have razed every member of the Faction in the vicinity, yet she remained relatively unscathed – aside from the stuttering headache from where she'd struck her head in the fall. She wondered why the Nambiro hadn't finished her off while she was incapacitated.
Groaning, she stood. She glanced around the battlefield. The loose dust was still hanging in the air like mist. Yet she could see Nambiro all around her, swaying as though confused, or…
Or drugged.
Of course, that was why she was alive. The Nambiro had absorbed the temporal energy release caused by the detonation. As a result, they were momentarily sated and sluggish, but as they sobered up they would be stronger for their fix.
The Faction had to make this moment count.
Muscles exhausted to the point of agony, Hangaku roused her remaining troops for one final effort.

The structures that Z'akbo had spied in the distance turned out to be smaller and closer than expected – the lack of a horizon making judging perspective difficult. They were markers of some sort, almost like grave stones, each with a uniform amount of ground separating them from the next. They each stood around five feet tall, with sloping backs that gave the impression of depth, causing Z'akbo to wonder if they were containers of some kind. They placed their hand on the nearest, and it felt the same sensation they had experienced on the outer plasmic shell of a Faction time-ship – the tugging of the dimensions within that stretch much deeper than the shape of the craft would suggest. Whatever was inside these objects could be considerably larger than the stones themselves. They were all hewn from the same black rock, and the only difference between them was the symbol engraved on the front, which was different on each stone. And one other thing that it took Z'akbo a moment to notice – at the base of each one were flowers or weeds of some kind, but of a different type and species from stone to stone. They were oddly familiar to Z'akbo, and yet strangely not, too – as if they'd seen them before, but the memory had been buried or erased. The meaning of the symbols seemed to almost bubble to the surface of Z'akbo's mind, before retreating again, not retrieved.
It was while studying one of the stones that Z'akbo first realised they were not alone. They dropped quickly to their knees and peered from behind the stone. Standing by another of the stones, in the middle-distance, was a figure. They were too far away for

Z'akbo to make out the details of their appearance, but their movements were visible. The figure raised their arm, holding an item in their hand and pointing it at the sky. A beam of light shot out of the device, expanding outwards until, in a trick of perspective that any magician would kill for, it completely encompassed one of the planets that hung there, and slowly, the planet was pulled down through the beam, but grew smaller as it descended, always remaining within the beam. As it approached the ground, the figure turned, and the planet turned with them, until it passed into the nearest of the stones. The stone glowed for a moment, and then returned to its previous black.

It wasn't difficult for Z'akbo to work out what they had just witnessed – although the power required to operate such a containment field must be enormous, suggesting much more advanced technology than was otherwise on show. Still, the blatant disregard for the basic laws of the universe made them queasy.

Z'akbo supposed it was only to be expected that they would feel strange here – they were, after all, walking through a realm in which the laws of accepted physics were seemingly suspended to a degree that would make even the Faction dizzy. Not only was the sky a vertigo-inducing impossibility, but with every step the dark, featureless terrain would stutter, to be replaced by sudden flashes of other worlds, as though an indecisive film director were trying to make up their mind which CGI background to deploy. One moment they were walking down a silent, dark path, the next they were in the middle of a desert stretching to a new horizon, twin suns burning all shadows away. Then, to a boggy marshland, a field of yellow flowers, a ruined city built from skulls, an iceberg the size of a continent, the depths of an ocean, the heart of a violent dust-storm. Every step an unpredictable adventure – a place and time that had been, and no longer was. The death throes of entire dimensions.

And yet...somehow this constant state of flux made sense to Z'akbo. The itch in their mind grew stronger but rather than irritating them, Z'akbo found that the more aware they became of it, the more the itch turned to an almost pleasant ache, like the stretching of a muscle unused for too long, and the more of these flashes they experienced, the sharper the image and more intense the impressions on each of their senses, like a runner feeling fitter after every run. And with every moment they spent here, the more certain of something Z'akbo became. This strange and impossible place was *home*.

Z'akbo's senses were finding the equilibrium, settling, calming. And now that they had, Z'akbo was becoming more aware of their surroundings; they knew with a deep certainty that they were not alone. Someone – or something – was following them.

Whatever it was, it was highly skilled. Z'akbo searched for any sign of their pursuer but saw only stillness in the gloom. They weighed up their options. There was little choice – wander aimlessly and allow their pursuer to make their move, or else try to draw them out.

They stopped, turning around on the spot. "Come on, then," they shouted. "Let's be seeing you."

For several moments there was nothing. Z'akbo peered into the endless gloaming, watching distant realities flicker like lightning. Just when they were starting to wonder if they'd been mistaken, a shape lunged out of the darkness and sent them sprawling awkwardly to the floor.

Without the combat training they'd received, Z'akbo would have been dead. As it was, instincts kicked in almost immediately. As they hit the floor, they used the backward momentum to break into a roll, unbalancing their attacker and preventing themselves from being pinned on the ground.

Z'akbo sprung up to their feet and faced their assailant. It was large and cat-like, similar in stature to a tiger or puma, all muscle and sinew, but with crimson fur, and eyes of the coldest blue. It looked at Z'akbo with an appraising gaze that showed no fear, just a calculating intelligence.

Z'akbo unsheathed their shadow-blade and prepared for the creature to attack again. It sprang, fangs exposed, but Z'akbo was ready this time and side-stepped, slicing down at the creature's flank as it leapt past. The shadow-blade bit into the creature without any resistance, slicing true and deep. It landed, pacing, and turned about on the spot, meeting Z'akbo's gaze.

It was unmarked, and untroubled. The shadow-blade had passed clean through it, with

little or no effect. It was almost as if the creature were formed from vapour, or liquid. Yet it had been solid enough when it had knocked Z'akbo to the floor. They had no doubt that the creature's fangs and claws would be more than capable of ripping them to pieces. If Z'akbo didn't work out a way to harm the creature quickly, then the mission would be ending here, and the Faction with it.

As the creature was about to take another leap, a small, metallic object landed between them, bouncing to a stop on the dusty road. It was the size of an ice-hockey puck, and when it stopped moving it began to glow red, then flicked rapidly through a spectrum of blue, green and purple, before shuffling through the colours in an apparently random pattern. The impact on the creature was marked. With every colour change it became more or less solid, sometimes existing only as a transparent outline, sometimes as a heavy hunk of muscle and fur. The creature turned and bolted into the darkness.

"We call them Shifters," said a voice from the darkness. It was an awkward voice, hesitant, that of someone who has not spoken for some time and is unsure of how to shape the correct emphases. "Somewhat like a Terran tiger, but with the ability to alter its own density to protect itself from attack. It was solid when it attacked you, but when it realised it was exposed to your weapon it shifted into a gaseous state so that your blade passed straight through it. It can also become liquid and even jump into the higher dimensions for short periods to escape predators. That's how some of them escaped from their time-line when it arrived here."

The voice was not unlike a human voice, and lacked any evidence of gender. Z'akbo had never heard someone else who sounded like that. The newcomer's footsteps became audible as they approached.

"That device forcibly alters the creature's state, forcing it to switch from one state to another at random. This confuses them so much that they simply turn and run." Onto the path stepped a member of a species that Z'akbo had only previously seen in a mirror. It was basically human in appearance, with a thin, narrow face and brown skin, and lacking the physical features that distinguish between the sexes. Like Z'akbo, the figure was truly androgynous – bald-headed, strong and graceful in their movements, wearing a tunic of elaborate embroidered patterns that clung to their slender torso. On their belt was the same kind of containment field generator that Z'akbo had seen in action shortly before.

"I am A'yub, Custodian of this section of the Garden. It is rare for me to receive a visitor, and to receive one unannounced is unprecedented. And to meet someone who is disconnected from the Loop? Impossible. You will not then, I trust, think ill of me if I ask who you are and what your business is here?"

"Of course," said Z'akbo, thinking rapidly. *I could claim to be some kind of Inspector from another area but I have no idea what authority, if any, exists here. Clearly these Custodians do sometimes leave this 'Garden', otherwise they would not have ships to traverse the universe beyond it. Perhaps a version of what I'm guessing is the truth is my best option.*

"My name is Z'akbo. As you can see, I'm one of you." *Is Custodians a race name or a job title? Skip it.* "I was taken away from here when I was a child on a mission with my parents. There was an accident and I was the only survivor. When I grew up I started studying the remains of the ship and found that there was a flight plan in the navigational computer. I managed to repair it and came to find out who I really am and where I'm from. I just moored the ship and you're the first person I have met since my arrival."

A'yub considered this for a moment. "I do recall hearing of a missing ship, some time ago now. We assumed all aboard must have died. Well, I apologise for being such a poor welcome. I can, however, take you to the City, where the Council could make more appropriate arrangements."

Or get royally in the way, Z'akbo thought. "That is very kind, Custodian A'yub. However, before that, there is a favour I would ask of you."

"Of course, if it is within my power, I will happily grant it."

"When my parents died, they were buried on the planet we crash-landed on. I grew up there but left with the remains of the ship to search for the right people to help me with its repairs. While away, the planet was erased from history in a battle between two great warring powers. Knowing what I now do, I am sure that planet and its time-line is somewhere here, encased in one of those stones. That is their function, is it not?"

"It is. Although I would question how you know that if you were but a child when you left

here."
"Please Custodian, there is no need for suspicion! The data-banks of the ship contained clues enough, and then I witnessed from afar how you contain the unfortunate planets that end up here."
"We do not think of it as containment, Z'akbo. What we do here is a calling – to bury those who have never been with appropriate respect, and maintain the Garden to prevent the entropy which could break down the walls between this dimension and the next, and unleash a chaos of completing realities – a clash between the 'is' and the 'never was'. We tend to the Garden, and the Garden holds chaos in check."
So you definitely won't like what I have in mind then, Z'akbo thought.
"A most worthy cause," said Z'akbo, lying through their teeth. "One I would myself be honoured to take on now that I have returned. But before this, I would like the opportunity to visit the stone that contains my parents' remains, to pay my last respects. It is an opportunity I thought had been taken from me forever. It would mean so much to me."
"I dare say that such a simple and heartfelt request could be granted with little difficulty," said A'yub, with a smile. "What was the name of the planet in question?"
Z'akbo returned the smile with that of the hunter about to engulf their prey.
"Patraxis 5."
A'yub had checked a device on their wrist which had catalogued all the stones that they were responsible for. As Z'akbo should have predicted, the appropriate stone was not far away. After all, even with the kind of advanced technology the Custodians had, why move a time-line further from its entry point than you need to? It looked identical to the others except for a slightly different symbol carved into the rock and a different kind of flower growing at its base.
"I wonder," said A'yub, "if you could grant me a small favour in return?"
"Of course," said, Z'akbo, having no idea whether they could grant it or not, or whether they would even if they could.
"As you can see," A'yub continued, "each stone is surrounded by a different form of flora, one native to the planet or region contained within the stone. Somehow it escapes the containment field and contaminates the ground around the stone. As someone who has visited the planet in question, I wonder if you could tell me the name of this flower? It is so rare that I get the opportunity to put a name to a species."
"I am afraid I am no horticulturalist, and this flower is not familiar to me – it was not native to the continent on which I spent my time."
"Oh, what a pity. I'm naturally curious you see and–"
"Do you mind if I have a moment alone?" Z'akbo interrupted.
"Oh, of course. I do apologise. I shall be just over here when you're finished."
"Thank-you." And Z'akbo embraced A'yub in a manner that clearly startled the Custodian.
"A tradition on Patraxis 5," Z'akbo explained, "to show gratitude to someone who has done you a great service."
"Nothing at all," said A'yub, who then wandered away, unaware that the containment field generator was no longer on their belt but instead nestled in Z'akbo's pocket.
With A'yub gone, Z'akbo was about to get to work completing their mission and capturing the Paradox Eater, when they felt a tugging sensation in their mind. There was something nearby, calling out to them, refusing to be denied. Z'akbo followed the sensation, walking, then running between the stones until they found the source. One stone in particular was calling out to them. Z'akbo reached out and touched it…
– sitting in the craft with their parents, absorbing the knowledge of how to pilot it by simply being there.
– a successful mission to purchase resources – food, technology, the things unavailable but necessary in the Garden.
– the Coming Of Age ceremony, the allocation of an area of the Garden to be their responsibility.
– a lifetime of quiet work, tending the stones.
– parenthood in the Collective, watching their child grow, feeling their every thought in the Loop.
– growing old in a place of no time, a life like all others. A well-managed, painless death.
…and jolted back as though burnt. There could be no doubt about what they had just

experienced – it was an alternate time-line of their own life, one that was erased and buried here like Patraxis 5. But that must mean…
Suddenly it all made sense. The mission. The Needleship. The incredible, million-to-one chance that the Faction would have a Custodian in their ranks who was not yet a full Cousin and so not drenched in paradox energy. A child whose parents were safely dead in an accident leaving the child open to being brought up in the Faction's ways – in the Family. But then, if you're a time-travelling cult who needs such a child and delights in paradox, such an 'accident' would be very easy to arrange.
Damn them! Z'akbo thought. *And damn them especially for making me despise the life I should have had.* For the life they had just experienced repulsed them as much as the Faction's manipulation did. And, Z'akbo knew that in a world in which the dead don't need to stay that way, the term 'murder' has a whole different meaning.
Z'akbo ran back to the stone containing Patraxis 5. Whatever else, there was still a mission to complete, and the connection with their alternate future seemed to have broken something in Z'akbo's mind, unblocking their connection to the telepathic loop that A'yub had mentioned but Z'akbo had not picked up on. Now they knew how to do what they were here for. They placed one hand on the stone, but this time, reached in. Z'akbo saw the whole of the reality encased there, moved through it, searching, and when they found what they were looking for, targeted the containment beam on it – dragging the Paradox Eater out and into the containment field. Once it was safely inside the device, Z'akbo ran back towards the river, dimly aware of A'yub shouting after them.
By the time Z'akbo reached the Needleship, they were being pursued. Behind them, Z'akbo could sense the Custodians scrambling, but they were too late. They had always been too late. The Needleship made its way back up the river of time, through the tunnel that linked the dimensions.
Z'akbo closed their eyes and jumped back into space and time.
It hadn't been enough. Hangaku was one of the last still fighting, nearly all the rest of the Faction having been consumed. The only reason she was still alive was that, with so few Cousins left, the Nambiro had begun to fight amongst themselves for the honour of the final few fixes. Hangaku had managed to slay a few more while their attention was focused on each other, but she now had barely enough strength to raise her arm.
She was done.
The Faction was done.

Once back inside normal time and space, Z'akbo piloted the ship to the Nambiro's deserted planet and activated the ship's grafted-in time-travel capability. Z'akbo couldn't be sure exactly when the planet had been drenched in paradox energy, but the creature they carried with them could. The Needleship had a small hold, and Z'akbo placed the compression field generator in front of the hanger doors, firmly clamped to the floor. Then they adjusted the settings on the device and returned to the cockpit, operating the command for the doors to open. When they did, the containment beam shot out into space, the Paradox Eater trapped within it.
It was impossible to describe the creature – only those themselves drenched in paradox would be able to stand looking at it, for all others its sheer wrongness was enough to drive the mind from its senses. Outside of the stasis field it came back to consciousness – confused, sluggish, but awake. And, most importantly, *hungry*.
It did not take long for the creature to detect the scent of paradox. Once it had the trail, it wasted no time, slipping between the time zones, heading back in time to the original release of paradox energy that had created such burning need in the Nambiro. As the creature swam into the past, it took Z'akbo's craft with it, dragging it along in its wake.
Z'akbo saw the vortex, the temporal interchange that exists within the physical universe, and through its translucent walls the events of the Nambiro's system rewinding themselves, visible mostly by the accelerated backward spin of the planet and the occasional school of Nambiro swimming backwards back to the home world.
And then, Z'akbo knew they had arrived. Two huge battle fleets hung in space – far enough away to not notice the planet but near enough to alter its future. A temporal cannon discharged, and suddenly there was only one fleet, and had only ever been one

fleet. An invisible spray of paradox energy was thrown out from an explosion that never happened. The Paradox Eater justified its name, spreading itself across the dimensions, consuming the raw energy and shielding the Nambiro home world from disaster.

A new future was born, travelling like a wave along the time-line.

Hangaku lay in the dirt with her life fading. Around her, her fallen Family – the Faction Paradox – was strewn across the battlefield like discarded leaves. Above her, the Nambiro swirled through the sky, looking desperately for any stray Cousin, any possible fix of paradox energy. Hangaku knew there was none. None but one…

Hangaku knew paradox. She had lived for, served and believed in paradox. She knew how it felt, how it tasted. And she knew its sweet scent, like pollen on the wind. She could smell it now, getting stronger. Z'akbo, she thought.

The Nambiro had been growing increasingly fractious since the supply of Cousins had started running out, but now they stirred. The Nambiro had clearly caught the same scent of paradox as Hangaku, and were confused by it. She could sense the mixture of elation and unease, how it troubled them, teased them. And then, as the smell got stronger, they realised the truth:

It was them. The Nambiro themselves were radiating paradox energy, exuding it, sweating it, exhaling it.

And then the cloud of desperate Nambiro turned in on itself, and the entire race began to rip itself apart.

To the Nambiro, the agony of being so close to the one thing that could satiate their desperate need overcame any other thought or emotion – loyalty, concern for the survival of their species, love. They turned on each other and attacked. Hangaku watched Nambiro feasting on one another's flesh, gorging on the bubbling energy they released. Some – delirious and exhausted by the battle – turned on themselves, tearing their own flesh away in ribbons.

Below, the bodies of the Faction were coated in the raining blood of their enemies.

By the time Z'akbo arrived on Dust, the chaos that had once reigned upon the planet's surface had abated. Thousands of Cousins had discovered that, not only had they died that day, but that they had also not died that day, and that there had never been an enemy to fight in the first place. This, of course, made them rather happy.

Hangaku was waiting for Z'akbo when the ship landed, having recognised the craft as it spiralled out of the dust-laden sky. Z'akbo climbed out to face her.

'Congratulations on a successful mission, Cousin,' she said.

Z'akbo remained unmoved. 'You killed my parents.'

Hangaku shrugged. 'You can go back and save them anytime you like. Where is the Paradox Eater?'

'I fired it back through the singularity. The Custodians will keep it safe. It had become a paradox in itself – who knows what kind of indigestion that might have brought about?'

Hangaku narrowed her eyes. 'The Faction wanted that beast...but I suppose you were right. When it expires it might release everything it consumed – and we don't want to go through any of this again.'

'All this...this is what I've lived for, isn't it? Why I was never made a Cousin, never made myself a paradox like the rest. This is what defines me. You discovered you were in danger and you formulated a way out, making me the doorway, manipulating my life, destroying my family. And you know the worst thing? You were successful, too. I'm still seeing everything from your point of view. I understand what you did and why you did it, and that understanding is the only thing keeping you alive right now.'

'With respect Z'akbo – you are a fine warrior, but you could never best me.'

'I wouldn't have to.' Z'akbo clicked their fingers and a creature leapt out of the cockpit. It resembled a tiger from old Earth, but with a different shade to its fur, and it prowled in front of Z'akbo protectively, brushing against their legs.

'I met her in the Custodian's Realm. She was frightened off and seems to regard me as her

superior as a result, and followed my scent trail back to the ship, where she waited for me. I've seen what this creature can do. Believe me, Hangaku – a single command from me and, for all your skill, you're just cat food.'
Hangaku nodded, but otherwise remained completely still. 'So what will you do now? Rescue your parents?'
Z'akbo shrugged. 'I don't know. I've seen what that kind of manipulation can do. I'm not sure I can be a part of it, even for a good reason. For now, I have a ship that can move between dimensions. I have company, of sorts. And I have a new heritage to explore. I'll get by. I only came back to warn you to stay out of my way. Goodbye Hangaku.'

Hangaku watched as her greatest student rose into the air of Dust, piloting their craft out of the atmosphere and into the future – or maybe to the side. It didn't matter. The Faction had died and lived. It had been a good day.

Epilogue

A Man Lays Dying

Philip Marsh

On the jungle floor, a man lays dying.
His normally pale skin, recently tanned by the tropical conditions, is thin and cracked, pieces falling off and floating to the ground like confetti. He can feel his life ending, drained away by an alien monstrosity he had dared disobey. Through the entrance to the hut he can just make out trees in the gloom, but he does not know if the darkness is due to fallen night or his failing eyes. Then, from the darkness, a figure emerges, as though stepping out of a long, dark cloak – which is ironic as that is exactly what the figure is wearing. Its basic shape is humanoid, but the cloak hides the detail. The cloak's hood is up, framing a skeletal face.
It has been that kind of day.
"Hello Bill," says Death.
Bill laughs. It doesn't come out pleasantly.
"I'm not Death, by the way," says the figure who is not, in fact, Death. "Although you are dying. Well...technically you're not because you've never been alive, although I guess in a way you have been. I mean, who gets to decide who's alive and who isn't, really?"
Bill can think of nothing to say to that.
"Sorry, I'm not explaining myself very well. Ok. So. My name is Cousin Lalussu of Faction Paradox. We're...well, probably best not worry who we are right now. You don't really have long enough for a full explanation."
"I am dying, Mr..." croaks Bill.
"*Cousin*. Well...as I said before, you kind of are and you kind of aren't. There's no easy way to tell you this but...you're not real."
"Not...real?"
"No. I mean, William Burroughs is real. Was real. Whatever. The point is that you're not really him. We created you because we needed that Nambiro to think the War was ending when it wasn't. So we made you and this whole environment to trick it. We got the idea from this." The Cousin reaches into his cloak and throws something down on the ground next to Bill. It is a battered paperback book – *The Yagé Letters* by William S. Burroughs.
"We needed a convincing environment you see, and I'd just read it and figured we could use the detail from the letters to flesh out the fake world. It even had a quest narrative already in it. Really, it was too perfect to miss."
"So...when...I...created…?"
"You were made the second before your first memory in South America. The other memories we implanted in you to make you convincing as a human. Those memories made you more substantial than the other characters around you, which is what attracted the Nambiro to you when it arrived from Dust looking for the Book. Admittedly, we probably picked the wrong person to represent a typical human, as Burroughs was hardly typical, but hey-ho, it did the job."
"You mean...I didn't kill Joan?"
"You personally? No. Never even met her. The real Burroughs killed her. Lucky really, as the tragedy we made you remember made you more convincing."
"You made me think I...for nothing?"
"Well, not for nothing. Actually it was a pretty big thing as far as the Faction are concerned. We won by the way – wiped out the Nambiro. You should at least be pleased about that part. Horrible little species. And this little deception here was an important part of it."
The hut, the jungle outside of it, is all growing fainter, until it resembles a fine mist. Bill

looks at his own hand and sees that he is becoming just as insubstantial. Only the Cousin remains solid.
"It's all...fading..."
"Yes. That's because we're closing the simulation down now that it's no longer needed. But I figured that you deserved an explanation before you...er...well...faded away."
"You mean...I did what you wanted me to do, and now you've no more use for me?"
"That's a harsh way of looking at it Bill – may I call you Bill? Look, I know it's rough, but we were fighting for our survival and no option was off the table. In many ways we did you a favour – you got to be a hero. The real Burroughs was...well...the term 'problematic' was pretty much invented to describe him. Killing Joan wasn't the only thing about him that could have put him in jail. Quite a lot of people would say that giving a version of him this chance of redemption was more than he deserved."
"But it...meant nothing."
"Meant nothing? You saved the Faction – or helped save it at any rate. Of course, I helped you along the way." The Cousin reaches up and removes his bony mask.
"Schindler?"
"Yup. It was my job to pop in from time to time when things seemed difficult and move things along. Quite successfully done, all things considered. The Nambiro got what they deserved for attacking the Faction. You got what you deserved for killing Joan, by proxy anyway. And the Faction survived. Everyone gets their just desserts."
"Yes," says Bill, his body now little more than a shadow, "they do." And he points the pistol that is still in his hand at the Cousin, and pulls the trigger.